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	Mr Gerry Kelly
	Mr Ian Paisley Jnr (<i>until 26/02/08</i>)

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 25 February 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: Before we begin, I wish to say that I have been approached by representatives from several parties in relation to an event that is planned to take place in Parliament Buildings. This is not a matter for the Chamber; it is a matter for the Commission, and the Commission will consider it at the earliest opportunity. I will, therefore, not be taking any points of order on the issue this afternoon.

Turning to another —

Dr W McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The deputy First Minister said that he “would have killed” every British soldier in Londonderry in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday. I ask you to rule on the appropriateness of that comment in light of the Pledge of Office that the deputy First Minister took, under which he is supposed to respect:

“the rule of law ... policing and the courts”.

Surely his statement was totally appropriate and, at least, inflammatory, if not inciteful? We need to have an investigation into whether Mr McGuinness carried out any murders of members of the security forces.

Mr Speaker: These issues of ministerial conduct are complex matters that I have no intention of trying to address in the Chamber today. I encourage the Member to seek advice from the Business Office, as there are a number of areas that he could consider. Again, on this issue, I have no intention of taking any further points of order from any party.

I want to turn, very quickly, to another matter —

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It seems that it takes only minutes for a Minister to resign in front of the press, but longer than seven days to resign in front of this House. In your estimation, Mr Speaker, when is a resignation a resignation? When can we expect a statement from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister?

Mr P Robinson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, is it beyond the wit of the Member for Strangford to recognise the difference between announcing an intention to do something, and actually doing it?

Mr Speaker: The Member in question remains a junior Minister. His duties are a matter for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. That is all that I have to say on that matter.

I turn to a matter that was raised in the Chamber by Mr David Ford on Monday 4 February. He asked me to consider whether Ministers were in breach of the Pledge of Office, alleging a failure to support the Programme for Government and the Budget.

On Tuesday 19 February, Mr Mervyn Storey sought a ruling on whether the alleged actions of a Minister, as referred to in a debate, represented a possible breach of the ministerial code and the Pledge of Office.

The issue of whether the Speaker has any authority over the Pledge of Office has been raised in the House on approximately four occasions. I have considered those points of order carefully, and my ruling is that the Speaker has no role in deciding whether the Pledge of Office has been breached.

There are, of course, provisions in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 that allow the Assembly to consider a Minister's, or junior Minister's, failure to observe any of the terms of the Pledge of Office, and to take appropriate action. A range of sanctions can be found in that Act, and there are conditions on the moving of a motion relating to each of those sanctions.

These are complex matters, and I encourage Members to seek advice outside the Chamber, rather than raising such matters in the House.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On the issue of wit, I wish to congratulate the wit that the electorate of Dromore demonstrated recently when making decisions at the ballot box.

I raised my earlier point of order with you only because of the delay. That delay is not ingratiating itself with this House and —

Mr Speaker: Order. I have already addressed that issue, which is a matter for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. It is certainly not an issue for the Speaker or for this House.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill

First Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): I beg to introduce the Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill [NIA 11/07], which is a Bill to amend the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 1979.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

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

Budget Bill

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: The Further Consideration Stage is intended to enable the Assembly to debate any further amendments to a Bill. As no amendments to the Budget Bill have been tabled, there will be no opportunity today to discuss the Bill. Members will be able to have a full debate during the Bill's Final Stage.

The Further Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 10/07] is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Review of the Construction Industry

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 are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Brolly: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the downturn in the construction industry, and the concerns raised by contractors about the powers and responsibilities of the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB); and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to conduct a wide-ranging review of the remit of the CITB, to include the issues of levies, apprenticeships and the disbursement of grants.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) was established under The Industrial Training (Construction Board) Order 1964.

Since its inception, there has been growing discontent about its remit and its operation, the main reason being fundamental: the construction industry is the only industry that is expected to pay a levy on its annual wage bill.

The stated purpose of the Construction Industry Training Board is to encourage contractors to provide training to those people employed, or intending to be employed, in the industry. Contractors consider that to be unnecessary since the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 1994 ensure that contractors provide the best training for their employees. Furthermore, the Buildsafe initiative demands a competent and well-trained workforce, and the possibility of Government funding. Stringent health-and-safety regulations, which are monitored regularly, are also in place; insurance premiums are high; and employers are increasingly concerned about the dangers that their workforces face, which can lead to possible injury or death. The avowed role of CITB is the monitoring of those training standards, which are paid for by the construction industry. That is hardly necessary, because no building contractor will pay for substandard training; a contractor will pay only for training that meets the required standards of health, safety and efficiency.

Until 1989, there were nine training boards. Only the construction industry was kept apart — maintaining its own training board and the statutory right to charge a levy to employers in the industry — and the other eight training boards were incorporated into the Training and Employment Agency (TEA). For example, the engineering industry's training board became the Engineering Training Council (ETC). That organisation does not collect a levy; it sells its training to the industry and is successful in doing so. The

situation is similar in the catering industry. Electrical contractors paid a levy until the mid-1990s, but the Training and Employment Agency allowed them to withdraw from CITB. They set up what is now known as the Electrical Training Trust (ETT); it does not collect a levy and is surviving well, with no complaints.

In the construction industry, the amount of levy collected from individual companies is based on their annual wage bill. In England, Scotland and Wales, that levy is obtained only from those companies that have a wage bill of more than £76,000, and they are charged at a rate of 0.2%. Incredibly, here, CITB collects a levy from any construction company with an annual wage bill of £15,000. That sum barely constitutes a decent single wage; it would not even be enough for an MLA to rent a constituency office. CITB across the water has been renamed and rebranded, but half of its 1,500-strong workforce performs the same function as CITB does here — and it still has the power to lift a levy at a rate of 0.2%. Our levy is lifted at a rate of 0.65% — over three times the rate imposed in England, Scotland and Wales. It was clearly intended that that revenue would be used to provide training to the industry. In England, Scotland and Wales, the payout for training is 80% of the levy collected; here, it is approximately 50%.

Mr Elliott: I am pleased that the Member refers to the approach in England, Scotland and Wales — rather than in another part of these islands — as the guide that we should follow on this matter.

Mr Brolly: Thank you, Tom. CITB here has a staff of 52; in England, Scotland and Wales, of an overall staff of 1,500, over 700 are employed specifically in the management of apprenticeships — something that our CITB simply does not do.

Therefore, people who work for CITB here number 800. The generally accepted ratio of our population to that of England, Scotland and Wales is 1:40. As a result, CITB employees here should be one fortieth of 800, which comes to 20. CITB here is amazingly overstaffed.

12.15 pm

The chairman of the board, who lives in Switzerland, is paid £18,000 a year to attend six meetings a year. Almost half of CITB staff here drive company cars. CITB used to provide considerable direct training. However, it has established a network of accredited trainers for that purpose, and they charge very high prices. Contractors must pay the commercial trainers and then apply to CITB for a grant towards the cost of that training. More than half of CITB's employers do not apply for a grant, because the process is too complicated and the forms are complex. One office manager told me that the amount of time that his staff would have to spend applying for the grant would

possibly end up costing his office more than the amount that they would receive in return.

For example, between 2006 and 2007, a substantial company where I come from paid CITB a levy of £17,500. It paid commercial trainers £49,000 for training. Having paid that sum, it applied for a grant from CITB and received £5,000. Therefore, that company paid almost £70,000, including a levy of £17,500, for £5,000 in return. Commercial training does not offer the construction industry good value for money.

Building contractors are particularly angry at the seemingly unlimited access that CITB officers have to their personal records and files. A CITB officer will come into an office to ask questions. He will record on his laptop the answers that he receives, and he will take that information back to CITB headquarters. That that is done causes contractors great resentment, not to mention the questions about data protection that arise.

In January 2006, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), under the review of public administration (RPA), decided to wind up CITB. However, lobbying by CITB resulted in the non-implementation of that decision. Again under RPA, and before the restoration of devolution, Peter Hain announced that he would amalgamate CITB and the Sector Skills Council (SSC) for Construction, but that did not happen. For a long time, the Construction Employers' Federation (CEF) was a great supporter of CITB — they were almost in the same bed — but it has recently forwarded a document to CITB that asks for a complete review of its operation and the manner in which it conducts its business. It has also asked CITB for a considerable reduction in the amount of levy that is exacted. The motion is fundamentally in tune with that recommendation.

Mr Spratt: I support the motion, and I declare an interest. My son owns a small construction company, so I have been given an invaluable insight into the current climate and the challenges that are faced by the construction industry. As we all know, the construction industry is a vital component of our economy, so we must aid it however we can. The industry is largely made up of small firms with an annual turnover of less than £250,000 a year. The industry comprises 11% of the Northern Ireland workforce and provides a livelihood to many people in Northern Ireland.

Only last week, a construction worker spoke on Radio Ulster's 'Evening Extra' programme, and I listened intently to his comments with a view to today's debate. I was struck by the gentleman's desire to remain in the industry, even at this difficult time. However, he made it clear that if work were not available in Northern Ireland, he would have to consider seriously the prospect of moving to Scotland, or perhaps the Isle of Man, to gain employment and earn a living. This young man should not have to leave Northern Ireland in such

circumstances. This is his home; yet he faces the real prospect, as some of his colleagues have also faced, of being forced to leave Northern Ireland to find work elsewhere.

There is much talk about the brain drain — do we now have a skills drain? It is individuals such as that gentleman; bricklayers; plumbers; joiners and electricians, who need the support of the structures and mechanisms that are in place in their industry to help them to get through this tough period

Mrs I Robinson: Does the Member agree that instances of paramilitary activity, whereby paramilitaries demand protection money from construction firms, comprise an additional drain on the construction industry? If such money is not paid, vehicles and other paraphernalia belonging to the firms are destroyed by those same people.

Mr Spratt: I agree fully with the honourable Member, and we have seen many examples in the not too distant past of very expensive equipment being burnt, so that is also a problem in the industry. The mechanism is in place to help the construction industry to tough it out.

Training is an important aspect of CITB's function; however, over the past few years, it appears that some people in the industry have become unclear about the organisation's training and development role. Indeed, the clouding over of CITB's role has been the knock on effect of a decrease in direct training. CITB appears to play a key role in identifying skills required, and one could argue that a more strategic role has developed for the board. We must assess whether the change in direction is positive, or negative, and whether both roles can be fulfilled adequately. We should note that CITB is a statutory body with the appropriate — and I emphasise appropriate — statutory powers to collect a levy and develop training criteria, and it is legally accountable. We should keep that in mind during our deliberations today.

It is vital that the board, as the representative body, is seen to represent the construction industry as a whole. That is particularly the case in the construction industry, where the vast majority of firms are small. We must ensure that the board is genuinely representative. Currently, CITB membership comprises employers, who take a lead role, academics, and trade unions. It is right that employers take a leading role on the board.

We must aid our industry in any way that we can at this time, as must those support groups that are already in place. We must always be mindful of the small construction firms that constitute probably the vast majority of employers in the construction industry; those small firms must not be left out. I support the motion.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Members for securing this very important debate. I, along with others, recognise that the construction industry is going

through a difficult period, and it is likely to do so for the next couple of years. However, it should also be noted that the industry has recently undergone a period of record growth, although, unfortunately, it seems that this has, somewhat inevitably, ended.

The sub-prime mortgage scandal, the credit squeeze, and, perhaps, some overly exuberant speculative development have taken their toll on Northern Ireland's housing market. We need a period of stocktaking in which we can support first-time buyers back into the market and ensure the construction industry's long-term sustainability and growth.

Those larger issues are reflected in our falling house prices and reduced activity in the construction sector. Indeed, the Ulster Bank's December 2007 construction purchasing managers' index (PMI) figure is the lowest since records began in 2000. In Northern Ireland, annual planning applications have dropped by 10,000 since 2004-05. Many problems can be put down to events and economics only. However, in this time of difficulty in the industry, it is right that we should examine the workings of the Construction Industry Training Board. The levy employed CITB is unique among similar industries and the question of value for money is very valid. The levy often hits small construction companies harder, and they can often not get the same use from the services and facilities provided by CITB.

I also draw attention to the limits on payroll costs in Northern Ireland, which are very low in comparison with those in the rest of the United Kingdom. That means that employers who can least afford to pay the levy are in the same position as very large companies.

Although CITB may have been fit for purpose in past decades, there is a case for a more dynamic approach to training and apprenticeships that better suits the needs of the industry in an increasingly difficult marketplace. I support the motion and any subsequent review.

Mr Attwood: I, too, welcome the debate, not least because it brings to the Chamber issues around training and apprenticeships in the North. Before dealing with some of the issues raised in Mr Brolly's motion, it is important to say that the House again expresses general concern about the current situation regarding the training of apprentices. The Minister will be replying later in the debate; however, on 11 February 2008, he confirmed on the Floor of the House that his Department is conducting a review of the Training for Success programme. That review is not only timely, it may well be urgent.

Preliminary figures given to the Committee for Employment and Learning a month ago showed that the number of people undertaking apprenticeships was down by approximately 2,000, year on year — from

7,500 to 5,000; there seemed to be some acute problems with the number of people entering apprenticeships at level 3; evidence given to the Committee, which the Chairperson can confirm, suggested that there are issues arising because part-time employees are not within the range of Training for Success contracts; and there are issues concerning people in the retail industry who may require training given that that industry is the single largest private-sector employer in the North. For all those reasons, the Minister should come to the House and state the nature of the Department's review, its time frame and its overall purpose.

I would like to think that the Minister and the Department will address, through the review, the particular issues regarding the construction industry that have been highlighted to the Committee. I will highlight three or four of those today.

First, there is the payment to apprentices — the Department has not laid down how much they should be earning and, as a consequence, some employers in the North are paying the minimum amount of £40 per week to those in training.

Secondly, there is inconsistency in training under the Training for Success programme. Some trainees may be in training for two days and on site for three; others may be in training for three days and on site for two; and some may be in training for three days only. That is not the way to develop a cohesive group of trainers in the North to serve the needs of construction industry trainees.

Thirdly, the fundamental issue, given that the Training for Success programme was meant to offer employment from day one, I have evidence that indicates that only 40% of those who go into training are in employment from day one. I trust that these broader issues about the construction industry will be addressed by the Department and by the Minister in his review.

12.30 pm

Finally, I want to turn to the other substance of the motion, namely the work of the Construction Industry Training Board. As Mr Brolly and other Members have said, I agree that it is time to conduct a review of the Construction Industry Training Board. If the Minister accepts the motion and a review is undertaken, I would urge him to consider four issues.

The first is the strategic planning role of CITB, whereby three members of staff and consultants are paid more than £300,000 per year. Is that value for money and is CITB providing the strategic planning requirements that the industry seeks? Secondly, why is CITB involved in careers promotion, because although it may or may not be doing that job well, is there not a family of careers advisers in the Department for Employment and Learning and the broader structures in the North who are providing that service? Furthermore,

does £156,000 per year need to be spent on staff and other costs for that function?

Thirdly, will the Minister, through the review, examine regional advisory services — in which staffing and other costs amount to £500,000 per year — and determine whether that work is being done in a targeted way? Finally, will the Minister look at administration and the payment of grants — whereby six staff are being paid, with associated costs, £188,000 per year — and decide whether that is the right way for the payment of grants and the needs of the industry to be met satisfactorily?

Mrs Long: I do not think that I need to declare an interest in this issue because I am no longer a practising civil engineer. However, from my time as a civil engineer, I have experience of CITB, through being trained by the organisation and working with other members of staff who were also trained by it.

Although I do not have any particular problem with the wording of the motion, I am slightly disappointed at the jaded view that people have taken of the organisation in the debate so far. No organisation is perfect and all of us would admit that there are areas that could be changed and improved. However, some of the things that CITB do are important and should not always be placed in a negative context.

One of the biggest gaps in the construction industry is being able to have training and skills provided, especially in an industry largely based on the self-employed or very small firms of contractors. Such firms, especially in periods of financial difficulty, can find it very hard to afford to invest in their staff. It can also be difficult for them to see the benefit of such investment when staff might be very mobile. They could be investing large sums to train staff who, in six months' time, could be working for a different company, which would be reaping the benefits. Therefore, it can be a difficult industry in which to embed training.

The idea behind the levy was that companies that had more money would pay more through a levy and that that would then be redistributed in more affordable training for those in smaller companies. Whether the levy balance is working well is an issue that needs to be considered. However, the notion that the construction industry as a whole should pay for the training of those employed in the construction industry is an entirely sensible and appropriate principle because, under current laws, many of the small, single-person or two-person firms in the construction sector could not afford to meet the requirements necessary to function in the industry.

There are other aspects of CITB that have to be considered. The organisation has its grant for training and achievement, providing training advice and research from its own facility. It also has a role in careers promotion and monitoring trading standards. Other Members have

suggested that that may not be necessary and that people will pay only for good-quality training. However, the standard of training is crucial.

Historically, the construction industry has one of the highest fatality rates of any industry. That rate has come down significantly because of good quality health-and-safety training, good practice and good monitoring. Unfortunately, experience shows that we cannot simply rely on people in the industry to self-regulate the quality of that training or trainees' performance on health-and-safety issues; it requires independent assessors. For those reasons, it is important that everyone has access to good quality training.

CITB has been reviewed several times, most recently in 2005, and the board is considering restructuring and reorganising. The Department for Employment and Learning is due to re-evaluate the board in 2010, so a review in 2008 would neither be value for money nor productive.

When people working in the industry were surveyed, more than half of them felt that health-and-safety concerns would be less of a priority if CITB were disbanded. Almost half of those surveyed thought that the quality and quantity of training would be reduced. If people are working in a dangerous and difficult environment in which investment in training, and the emphasis on health and safety, is reduced, that should concern the Assembly.

Mr Brolly: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Long: I cannot give way; I am very short of time.

The promotion of careers in the construction industry is also an issue. The industry is diverse, and it is difficult for people to get hands-on work experience, because of site conditions and health-and-safety requirements, in order to decide which area of the industry appeals to them. CITB has brought people onto controlled sites so that they can get valuable hands-on experience. I would not completely dismiss CITB's role in such activities, but whether it should be the lead partner is another question. However, it is important to allow school-age students onto construction sites so that they can get a flavour of the opportunities that are available.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs Long: The Alliance Party has no problem with the motion, but I am slightly concerned about the tone of the debate.

Mr McQuillan: All Members acknowledge the fact that there has been a downward trend in the construction industry over recent months. How do we address that downturn, and how do we invest in training our workforce for the future?

The Programme for Government and the Budget have made it clear that the present situation of Northern

Ireland's being heavily dependent on the public sector is not sustainable. We must examine every area of business life in Northern Ireland in order to address that issue. Last week, we debated our tourism industry, which can be developed by private investment. In the course of that development, the construction industry would undoubtedly benefit by way of newbuild projects.

We must also examine the development of Northern Ireland's infrastructure needs to ensure that private-sector investors view Northern Ireland as being the right place in which to invest. The upgrade of the water and sewerage systems is under way, and the building of hotels and the upgrading of our road and rail networks are linked to the future economic well-being of our construction industry.

In order to achieve the technical or managerial skills and the professionalism required to ensure the delivery of those standards, we must have the best system in place, for Northern Ireland and beyond, to develop those skills and professionalism. A root-and-branch review of the Construction Industry Training Board will help to identify those areas where improvements can, or should, be made and modernised. That should also ensure that CITB is a proactive body that can identify the need for new skills early on — for example, in energy-efficient home construction — and put in place the training programmes that are needed to ensure that the industry can not only keep up to date, but be ahead of its rivals in the UK and, indeed, worldwide.

I am not saying that the existing CITB structure cannot deliver on those issues, and I do not want anyone who is involved with the board to think that I am criticising the current structures. However, there are always good reasons for taking a long, hard look at the structures and seeing ways in which they can be improved so that any skills deficit is reduced and a skills base is available in Northern Ireland when it is required. I fully recognise CITB's good training work in several areas — health and safety, apprenticeships and scaffold operator training. My suggestion would ensure the best possible system for Northern Ireland.

I ask the Minister for Employment and Learning to conduct a review, with the aim of providing the world-class skills that are required to ensure that Northern Ireland can build its future in-house from a highly skilled workforce that has been trained by local firms. In that way, the economic benefits of regeneration and development can remain part of Northern Ireland's economy. That will benefit not only construction firms, but the people whom they employ. Our economy can, and will, be expanded; however, any skills deficit will put us at a disadvantage competitively, result in a further downturn in the construction industry and result in fewer people being employed in the industry.

Let us take this opportunity to ensure that a vital component of our economic development is ready for the challenges that lie ahead.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Like other Members, I welcome the motion. I welcome the Minister for Employment and Learning and commend the other parties for not tabling amendments, because the motion covers the issues that Members have highlighted. Judging by Members' contributions, I think that the motion will receive the unanimous support of the House.

Although I take on board Naomi Long's point about positive results emanating from the training board, I want to make it clear that Sinn Féin has not called for the disbandment of CITB, but a fundamental review.

I agree wholeheartedly, with David McClarty's view that the construction industry has grown over the past few years. The investment strategy states that public investment could total £14·3 billion over the next 10 years, with nearly £4 billion already confirmed for 2006-08. Therefore, we must ensure that the correct amount of money goes to the construction industry.

The purpose of the motion is to raise genuine concerns that the construction industry has highlighted to Sinn Féin about CITB; I am sure that the board has done the same to other parties and individuals. In February 2005, Deloitte MCS submitted a final report to the Department for Employment and Learning on its review of CITB. The board was last reviewed in 1998. During the 2005 review, there were substantial terms of reference, but they did not include some issues of major concern to the construction industry. The purpose of Sinn Féin's motion is to address those issues and for the review to start off on the right footing.

The purpose of CITB is to encourage the adequate training of those employed, or intending to be employed, in the construction industry. Francie Brolly and other Members highlighted the fact that no statutory levy is imposed on any other industry. Therefore, why impose a levy on one group and not on another? I accept that CITB uses the moneys to help the industry with training costs. However, companies complain that it is too difficult to claim grants under the current system. Some companies do not even try to claim, because the complicated application form changes from year to year.

Francie Brolly and Alex Attwood referred to the fact that CITB in England pays out over 80% of its levy in incoming grant aid, but here it is just over 43%. How do we account for the other 57%? It has been indicated that training accounts for that 57%, but we need to see that information so that people are made accountable for the money that they receive. CITB has an annual income of £42 million and a staff of 52; almost half the levies collected in 2002-03 were spent on salaries,

travel and company cars. Is that value for money? We need to ask those questions and get answers.

The 2005 review accepted that the need for training in the construction industry is not matched by the uptake of training by contractors.

The perceived value for money provided by CITB is a concern for many in the industry. Those issues were highlighted during the Department's own review. Members should bear in mind that, in the motion, Sinn Féin calls for the proposed review to include:

“the issues of levies, apprenticeships and the disbursement of grants.”

12.45 pm

Naomi Long said also that there seems to be a jaded view of CITB and that no organisation is perfect. That may be her point of view, but the Assembly should strive for perfection and must move in that direction.

I agree with Jimmy Spratt that CITB, as the representative body, should be seen to represent the industry as a whole. That comment was spot on.

I had intended to make some other points, but I am conscious that my time is up. I support the motion and commend it to the other parties. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. Indeed, it was not too long ago that the House debated the subject of apprenticeships in Northern Ireland, and it is important to discuss it again in relation to the construction industry.

There is work, and we have the employers. There is a need for the Department to exercise its rights and to put in place the regulations required to meet the projected need in the Province.

Ther er scaurs that tha industree canny keap gawn oan tha wae it shud be acaus o' tha nummer o' plannin epikatshuns gaun thru'. But mi lukin wud be that whun we hae tha labur nummers whau hae tha knac, we wull be abel tae pit fort oorsels on tha mainland en fardar afiel, which meens ther wull aye be woark fer them whau that er abel tae dae it.

There are fears that the industry cannot continue in the way that it is due to the number of planning applications going through. However, my view is that when we have the skilled labour numbers, we will be able to promote ourselves on the mainland and further afield. That means that there will always be work for those who are able to do it.

Northern Ireland's growth rate is significantly higher than the rest of the United Kingdom's as regards the construction industry. It has been estimated that both construction output and full-time employment are expected to rise by an annual average of 4·4% and 3·9% respectively, leading up to 2010. That prospective work will, of course, require an increase in skilled workers. DEL, therefore, must step into its role and work with

CITB to make provision for that. The point is that we want partnership, not abolition, and for that partnership to be — excuse the pun — more constructive.

It is not simply the projected growth in Northern Ireland that demands attention. Our young men, and to a lesser extent, our young women are being poached to work on the mainland, as a consequence of the superior training that is inherent in Northern Ireland. I know a 22-year-old man who, having finished his apprenticeship as a foreman, did some work experience on the mainland. The English firm offered him a starting wage of £32,000 plus bonuses, as well as free flights home every other weekend. It was difficult for that young man to stay at home, especially as he was considering buying his own apartment in Ards, which is the property hot spot of the UK. He did, however, choose to work at home for a lesser wage. I cannot pretend that that will always be the case. We train young men to higher standards than on the mainland only to have them poached by firms there. That is unacceptable.

At present, the construction industry in Northern Ireland employs over 78,000 people, and that number is expected to increase by 10,000 in the next two years. At this point, I want to make a plea for Strangford. In that area, there are many people, young and old — especially the young ones coming through — looking for jobs, and the construction industry is a very important part of the employment structure. It is clear that there must be a considered and co-ordinated effort not only to supply the numbers needed to get the work done in the Province, but to enable more Northern Ireland firms to tender on the mainland, while displaying their superior skills.

A Saintfield firm called Dawson Wam (GB) Ltd, which is based in my constituency, is working on a signature project in Canary Wharf in London and on some motorway projects, using its teams from the Province and doing an exemplary job. It is its vision, and that of many other firms in Northern Ireland, to be able to expand on the mainland.

There are opportunities that far exceed the work to be done in the Province, and now is the time to put in place the structures that are needed to facilitate that growth, both in Northern Ireland and further afield. It is also clear that that must be done in partnership with CITB and that it is no longer enough for CITB and the Department to be exclusive from each other in the way that they work.

CITB is known for its ability to liaise well with small firms, and we must ensure that it liaises with bigger businesses, too. The Department for Employment and Learning's role is to promote, as well as to encourage and support, the smaller things.

It is clear that, at some stage, there has been a breakdown in communication, and that a greater vision

must be recognised and pursued. DEL must liaise with the Department for Social Development (DSD), and all other Departments, to ensure that the work that is scheduled is done by home-grown teams rather than by teams from the Republic and elsewhere, which has been the case in some hospital projects of which I am aware.

If we build up our own industry, train the men and women, and let them work, in the long run, we will see more Northern Ireland firms being big hitters on the mainland, and further boosting our reputation and economy. We must address the issues, put in the groundwork and the good foundations, and the superior skills that our construction industry displays will ensure that we get the recognition and the jobs that we very much deserve.

Mr O'Loan: I want to focus primarily on the phrase in the motion that refers to:

“the downturn in the construction industry”.

Although I am content with the latter part of the proposal, I have some concerns about that phrase, because it is neither accurate nor helpful. I say that in the context of the upcoming investment conference, which is a major opportunity for us. It puts huge demands on all sectors to deliver, and it is important that we send out the right message. I am not sure that the wording used does that.

We have a construction industry that can compete in international markets, even though I cite only two examples — Mivan and the Patton Group, which I heard being referred to recently as having done a multimillion-pound shop-fit for Selfridges in London. We have an industry that can compete on the international stage.

Today, I, and other members of my party, met the Construction Employers Federation. I want to make some broad comments about the industry as a whole, and I hope that I do justice to the remarks that were made to us. The mood of CEF is quite buoyant. I will make some specific points on housing, but we should not forget that construction is not just about housing — there are other sectors of the industry, such as retail and office building. There is also a much wider civil engineering sector.

There is no doubt that there is a decline in house starts, following a welcome drop in house prices. Nonetheless, the omens for the future are strong. Housing growth indicators describe a housing need, showing requirements for a large growth in the housing stock — I believe as many as 200,000 houses over a forecast period, which is something in the order of 15 years. We know about the determined plans of the Executive to build 10,000 social houses within five years.

We have an investment strategy, with plans for an overall investment of £18 billion by 2018, and much of

that money will go into the construction industry. An important issue is the capacity of the sector to deliver, and the message that I heard today is that the sector is confident that it can deliver. A major concern of the sector is the reality of the public expenditure plans, both in the short term and the medium term. The Assembly and Executive are putting a great deal of faith in asset sales. The uncertainties in relation to that strategy need to be recognised. There is also a considerable lack of detail about the role of PPPs in the delivery of the investment strategy.

Before industry will invest, it needs to have confidence in that level of public investment. We want to put as much certainty as we can into the system — although there can never be total certainty, as the strength of a private enterprise system is that it is not certain. There is a link to the employment and training issue in the area of confidence and certainty. Before the industry will commit to expanding its workforce and investing in training, it needs to have confidence that it is going to get its money back on its investment.

Although I support the proposal concerning CITB, I am critical of a significant amount of what I heard from the proposer of the motion, and in one later speech.

Mr Brolly: Surely the Member understands that he is talking about firms such as the Patton Group and Mivan, which would be able to absorb a few years of weak turnover. Jimmy Spratt and I are talking about the people from our communities, such as the small contractors, who together employ a huge number of people. However, I know of construction workers from my home community who are walking the streets today.

Mr O'Loan: I am aware of the issues with which small employers have to deal, and I know that they are an important part of the construction industry. In fact, when I was talking to the representatives of CEF this morning, we discussed small firms. Therefore, I am not blind to those realities; I am merely attempting to give an overview of where the sector is going and of the part that the Assembly and the Executive play in it.

As I have said, I am critical of a great deal that I have heard Members say today. I feel that they have dealt unnecessarily with issues that, in the context of the overall strategy, are relatively petty. We have a bigger job to do; the Executive and Assembly need to rise to the occasion and contribute to major strategic decision-making.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I am indebted to the Members who tabled the motion. There is a range of issues to be dealt with, and I will attempt to do that as I proceed. However, to give Members some context, the previous review of CITB commenced in 2004, and since then, progress has been made on its recommendations. The review, the report of which is available publicly on the Department's

website, concluded that CITB be retained and that a statutory levy is necessary for the sector. Construction industry employers indicated in that review that the functions of CITB and its continued existence were considered necessary in order to encourage training.

The skills context in which CITB operates is changing rapidly and is very broad. It may be helpful if I outline briefly the current skills position, including the policy debate on collective measures, which is topical across the UK. Over the past decade, our economy has experienced steady growth. Our labour supply continues to increase due to high levels of inward migration and to the stream of well-educated young people who are entering the workforce. Those developments, coupled with high labour demand, have seen employment rise strongly and our productivity increase. However, in Northern Ireland, we have the highest number of employed and the lowest number of unemployed people that we have ever had.

In the recent Programme for Government, the Executive identified the economy as a primary focus. They also identified skills as one of the six pillars that were specified in the investment strategy. Our vision for a successful future economy has been characterised by high productivity, a highly skilled and flexible workforce, and economic growth. However, this year, we will review our skills strategy to take account of the changing situation that has been described. That review will take account of the all-island and cross-UK context, and all that will be put in the context of Europe and of the global challenges that face us.

Total employment in the construction sector in Northern Ireland is expected to rise from approximately 84,000 to 95,000 between 2008 and 2012. To meet that demand, almost 3,000 new workers will be required to join the industry each year. One of the factors boosting demand will be the investment strategy for Northern Ireland 2008-18, through which over £18 billion of new infrastructure will be delivered during those 10 years.

The potential benefits will be maximised if we can build skill levels in the local construction workforce to strengthen the economy. CITB, as a partner in construction skills, will have to address the skills issues for the sector.

The motion noted the recent downturn in the construction sector. It is true that construction in Northern Ireland has enjoyed strong growth in recent years, and we know that that downturn has tended to be concentrated in the housing market. However, the investment strategy has resulted in the infrastructure side of the sector still enjoying significant buoyancy.

1.00 pm

Turning to Members' points, Jimmy Spratt asked who takes the lead role in CITB. Certainly, the employers have the lead role in making the decision on the levy,

but the board's entire membership deals collectively with other matters.

Mr McClarty discussed whether small firms get value for money. As I understand it, approximately 64% of the CITB levy comes from those firms, which receive approximately 68% of the grants that the board issues.

When proposing the motion, Mr Brolly referred to the RPA proposal to amalgamate CITB and ConstructionSkills. Both organisations exist here and in Great Britain, and the Department for Employment and Learning has encouraged their alignment here. As Members are aware, CITB has statutory levy-raising powers, which are preserved under the new arrangements. I warmly welcome the fact that ConstructionSkills is establishing itself in Northern Ireland in order to undertake its sector skills role.

Alex Attwood raised several issues, including careers and the review of Training for Success. Work on Training for Success has already commenced, and we envisage that we will be in a position to consult with the Committee for Employment and Learning in March or April, with a view to having any revisions in place for the next academic year, which commences in September. Although we have looked closely at several of the issues at an earlier stage than was anticipated, we believe that the necessary flexibility must exist. I hope to be able to talk shortly to Mr Attwood and other members of the Committee about that matter.

Mr Attwood also mentioned wages, and it is ironic that apprentices are exempt from the national minimum wage regulations. That point is perhaps not understood fully outside the House. The Department's guidelines basically state that people should be paid the going rate for the job. We know that that does not happen in all cases, but to put it into context, the national minimum wage regulations do not actually deal with that.

Turning to the sector skills —

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for giving way. I have listened very carefully to what he has said, but I have not picked up whether he is minded to conduct a review on the workings of CITB.

Sir Reg Empey: Perhaps if the Member would let me finish, he would get a flavour of that later in the debate.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister.

My second point is that construction employers do not like the fact that people are getting paid £40 a week. They are telling their members and the industry that they should pay on an appropriate scale. The construction employers are saying that whatever the Department's advice may be, it is so vague as to allow employers to pay their workers £40 a week. Is there not a need for less ambiguity and for more definition about what apprentices should, and must, be paid?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member will realise that the national minimum wage regulations are not a devolved matter, and that, therefore, creates a particular difficulty for us. An additional issue is the question of what employers pay and whether they provide apprenticeships. I have made it clear to the House previously that I believe that employers have a responsibility — and indeed a much greater role to play — to provide apprenticeships. Many do not do so, which is a weakness in our system.

Many employers have been able to hide behind the inward migration of substantial numbers of workers, who are effectively covering up for the skills gaps that clearly exist. If those workers decide to move elsewhere, we would have a significant problem ahead of us.

As far as the more substantial issues are concerned, I have dealt with Training for Success, and, as I said, I hope that my Department will shortly be in a position to ask Members to give the matter further consideration in a future debate.

Among the Members who highlighted other issues, Naomi Long talked about problems with the atmosphere and that a jaded approach was being taken. It is inevitable that any tax on employers will create difficulties, and that is the case with the one that CITB, in effect, imposes. However, I want to set that issue in the context of the Leitch Review that was published at the end of 2006. Over the past few months I have been under pressure from Whitehall Ministers who have been considering whether more bodies in GB should levy employers, which is what happened here several years ago. CITB is the only remaining training board in Northern Ireland to levy employers, but there used to be others.

The Leitch Review recommended voluntary arrangements with employers for training. However, it did not anticipate the necessity to proceed with the imposition of bureaucracy. It is inevitable and unavoidable that when that happens, administration accounts for a significant percentage of the levy. However, some Members seem to be confused about that issue: approximately 80% of the levied amount is returned to employers in the form of grants and soft assistance, such as advice, and so forth. Therefore, contrary to what has been implied, the entire levy is not taken up by administration. Simply to calculate the amount of money that remains after grants are paid would indicate that larger amounts are being spent on administration than is the case.

I have been resisting the suggestion that my Department creates a series of bodies that could levy employers to provide training. Not only have employers enough to contend with, but they must be convinced of the merit of training. One wonders at the long-term viability of

employers who do not recognise that having well-trained staff is in the interest of their long-term bottom line.

Mrs Long: Does the Minister accept that workforce mobility and the difficulty in making employers aware of the benefit to their businesses of investing large sums of money in training an individual who may quickly move on from the company, make the construction industry unique?

Sir Reg Empey: I accept that the construction industry is unique because of the nature of the work and the fact that it is constantly changing: that is why CITB was not subsumed into a single training board with all the other bodies.

I welcome today's debate. As Members said, CITB was reviewed in 2004-05 and, under the quinquennial arrangement, the next review is not due until 2009. The proposed review of CITB is at the core of the debate. As CITB is a non-departmental public body, it is fully accountable, through the Department for Employment and Learning, to the Assembly, and its performance is monitored closely. It is subject to regular formal reviews, the next of which is due to commence in 2009.

From Members' comments today, the concerns that they raised, and the significant changes in construction skills, it is evident that it is now timely to pause and reflect on the operation and funding of CITB. Therefore, in view of the issues raised by Assembly colleagues in the debate, I am prepared to bring forward the planned review of CITB in 2009 to this year. Construction is an important sector in the local economy, and the review will clarify the appropriate future role of CITB.

I shall bring forward the review to the current calendar year. I will keep the Committee advised and apprised of the Department's proposals. That is my response to the concerns that have been raised during the debate. I hope that I have taken into account the significant concerns that have been expressed. However, we must be fair to everyone, and the review will have no predetermined outcome. In view of what Members have said, it is timely to expedite the review.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for bringing forward the review. I hope — and I am sure that all Members agree — that the review takes place early this year because it is important that the industry moves in the right direction. Given that the Minister has said that he will bring the review forward, my speech will not last for 10 minutes.

When proposing the motion, Francie Brolly mentioned levies, which must be considered as part of the review. The Minister said that he is not sure how the review will look, or what outcomes it will produce. Along with the Minister, I attended an event organised by the

Northern Ireland Assembly and Business Trust in this Building, which was attended by businesspeople from all over the North. One businessman that I spoke to said that he could employ an additional 200 people the following day if they had the necessary level of skills. That is a very important issue, as is the matter of levies.

One of the most important training initiatives in the construction industry is the apprenticeship system. CITB has no direct role in the delivery of that scheme or in the setting of standards, which are controlled by the national vocational qualifications system. CITB has a careers department, which duplicates the work of trained careers teachers in schools, recruitment officers for training organisations, colleges and universities, and staff in the local jobcentres. Government schemes such as Bridge to Employment have provided training for the construction industry, without a levy. The construction industry must invest in its workforce.

Francie Brolly also mentioned value for money, and used the example of a local firm that paid CITB a levy of £17,500, and £49,000 to commercial trainers for training, but received a grant of only £5,000. I am not sure whether such practice is sustainable in the construction industry.

The Member for South Belfast Jimmy Spratt mentioned the challenges that the construction industry faces, particularly small firms. He said that it is sometimes beneficial for small firms to move elsewhere, which some have done, and some might still do. We do not want that to happen because such firms are too important to the development and sustainability of the North. Mr Spratt went on to talk about skills training, which is something that Sinn Féin hopes is addressed by the review because the skills requirement is unclear.

David McClarty said that the record growth of recent times has ended, and he was later criticised by Declan O'Loan, who said that we must be careful about the terminology that we use. Mr McClarty then spoke of fit-for-purpose training and apprenticeships, which ties in with the issue of value for money.

Alex Attwood voiced his concern about training apprenticeships — a point that has been well made during the debate. The review should proceed as a matter of urgency.

Naomi Long mentioned her civil engineering background. She may not have a conflict of interests any more — it is up to her whether she goes back to that occupation.

Mrs Long: That depends on the electorate.

Mr P Maskey: I was just about to say that politics is a strange game — some of us may not be here next year. It is always good to have an occupation to return to if needs be.

1.15 pm

Naomi Long also talked about affordability for employers and staff, and she mentioned the review, which she said should create more understanding.

The motion is very clear in calling for the Minister:
“to conduct a wide-ranging review of the remit of the CITB”.

I hope that we have managed to address some of her concerns about the wording of the motion.

Adrian McQuillan said that the review will assist in creating better-quality training and safety for the workforce. We must strive for world-class skills for our workforce. Sue Ramsey commended other parties for not tabling amendments to the motion, and I echo her remarks. Members have shown leadership.

Jim Shannon talked about people in his constituency of Strangford, and he referred to an individual who could have secured employment in England with a salary of £32,000 but who chose to stay here. That person has shown leadership by staying, and I hope that he can be a future employer. I ask Mr Shannon to send him our regards.

Minister Empey referred to some of the issues that we want to see covered in the review. I thank him for coming to the Chamber and for saying that he will bring the review forward by a year. I hope that the review will occur as early as possible this year; it has been pointed out several times already today that we need it to happen as quickly as possible. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the downturn in the construction industry, and the concerns raised by contractors about the powers and responsibilities of the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB); and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to conduct a wide-ranging review of the remit of the CITB, to include the issues of levies, apprenticeships and the disbursement of grants.

Post-Primary Transfer

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.

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 Lunn: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the lack of clarity in the Minister of Education’s proposals for post-primary transfer; and urges her to bring details of her proposals immediately before the Executive and the Assembly, to ease the concerns of parents, pupils and teachers.

The motion has been tabled on behalf of the many parents who are facing uncertainty about their children’s educational future. I am pleased to have the support of two other parties and, I suspect, the tacit support of one more. Whatever the politics, we will have the support of every parent, pupil and teaching professional in Northern Ireland, as they are equally frustrated and alarmed at the delay in the lack of concrete proposals from the Department.

In the Minister’s vision statement of 4 December, she offered:

“the creation and delivery of a fundamentally exciting new vision for the education system in the North”. — [*Official Report, Vol 26, No 1, p8, col 1*].

Those are the Minister’s words, not mine. Her aim, in itself, is worthy. However, visions are all very well, but we need proposals and some meat on the bones.

The Minister’s confirmation of her predecessor’s decision to end the 11-plus has been greeted by all sections of society as overdue and progressive, and her stated preference for transfer at the age of 14 by means other than purely academic selection certainly finds favour with my party. However, where are the details on that preference?

This will be the final year for the 11-plus, but where is its replacement? In her vision statement, she hinted at preferences — community, geography and family considerations. Does “geography” mean a postcode lottery? Does “community” mean nationalists, loyalists, Protestant or Catholic? How will the receiving schools sort out the problems of oversubscription without the benefit of access to the pupil profiles? In that context, I refer to an answer that the Minister gave during her meeting on 31 January. From that answer, it appears to me that the receiving schools will be allowed to advise pupils.

To my mind, that is another form of selection. If a school can advise pupils whether or not they should apply to it, surely that amounts to selection.

Will the Association for Quality Education be permitted to set up its own entrance exams? If new arrangements are not put in place soon, there will be nothing to stop it from doing that. Whether that is good or bad depends on one's point of view, but I am concerned about legalities. Such tests will become inevitable due to ministerial inaction, and there will be no legal way of stopping them.

Beyond transfer problems, but closely linked to them, lie the issues of area-based planning, the future of the schools estate, and sustainable schools. There is also the problem of the 50,000 empty school desks — a number that is increasing. From my party's perspective, the absence of any emphasis on integrated or broadly shared or mixed education, which we highlighted in our response to the Programme for Government, remains a concern. It is difficult to resist the unionist view that the Irish-medium sector is being given undue priority. However, I suppose that one could contrast the attitude of one DUP Minister towards Irish-language matters.

I wish to mention the role of the Committee for Education. I note the Minister's well-timed interview in today's 'Belfast Telegraph'. She seems to be adhering to the principle of getting her reaction in first. Just before the Assembly debate on 11 December 2007, the Minister came up with a vision statement, and now she has given a major interview to a local paper in advance of this debate.

The Minister states that she is still waiting for the Committee to come to her with a consensus view on her transfer proposals.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Member agree that, at least, the interview with the major paper might have been an opportunity for the Minister to offer some clarity? However, all that she could say, on three occasions, was that she would give parents notice in plenty of time, but she did not say when new arrangements would be in place. Will it be in 2008, 2009 or 2010?

Mr Lunn: The Minister's interview was well up to the standard of her recent statements, and did not add anything to the debate.

In that interview, the Minister said that she wrote to the Committee in December, and is still waiting for a reply. The Minister received a reply from the Committee in the form of about 30 questions, and she took until 31 January to answer them. The answers came in written form and were handed to Committee members just before the start of our now infamous meeting on that date. The answers were as vague as the vision statement and her response to the debate of 11 December 2007. That meeting was short and confrontational, and

it added nothing to the debate. It provided no further clarity to the Committee.

Without excusing the behaviour of some Committee members — although I can understand their frustration — and speaking as someone who was prepared to give the Minister time and a measure of support, it must be said that her attitude to the Committee has been contemptuous and dismissive. It seems that she wants to acknowledge that a good relationship is important, but has decided not to contribute to it. Her refusals, most of the time, to come before the Committee, do not do her any credit.

The Committee must cool off too. However, I hope that the Minister will accept the invitation that is now on her desk to come to talk to the Committee again to see whether we can move the discussion forward.

Most of the SDLP amendment is fine. The references to equality of opportunity, protecting against a postcode lottery, local needs, area-based planning and sustainable schools echo and amplify the thrust of our motion. However, we prefer to leave in the reference to the Executive, and, therefore, we cannot accept the amendment.

The schoolchildren of Northern Ireland deserve better from the Assembly. However, in the special circumstances that pertain in this place, it is up to the Minister to step up to the mark. I look forward to hearing her detailed proposals. There must be no more equivocation or vague statements. The Minister must recognise of the role of the Committee, which, for the record, is not simply another stakeholder. It has a scrutiny job to do, but it requires something to scrutinise.

I await with interest the Minister's contribution to this debate, when she will have another opportunity to explain herself and, perhaps, provide some timescales or a view of her emerging thoughts. At the least, she must provide something more illuminating than her previous statements.

Perhaps she can dispel the rumour that her relationship with her senior officials is even worse than the one she has with the Education Committee, and that her interminable consultations with all kinds of stakeholders are only covering up the fact that she does not know how to proceed.

Actions are needed: not more entreaties to "join with me", followed by more confrontation and more squabbling through the media. I leave it at that.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Dominic Bradley to move the amendment, I remind Members that they should speak through the Chair, not to one another across the Floor.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I beg to move the amendment: Leave out "the Executive and"; and at end insert

“, by setting out the practical steps necessary to deliver reform, while (i) enhancing quality; (ii) ensuring equality of opportunity for all; (iii) protecting against a post-code lottery; (iv) addressing local needs and making best use of resources through area-based planning; and (v) delivering sustainable schools.”

We live in a world in which change is rapid and necessary. In education, as in other aspects of life, we require change. The Minister has told us that; and not many would disagree with her. Change in education is needed because we need a system that meets the needs of today's young people. The global economy changes rapidly, and high-level skills are needed across the workforce. We need an education system that values all pupils and the pathways that they choose to follow. Change is also inevitable due to the falling pupil numbers. At a time of scarce resources and empty seats, we must put what we have to the best possible use.

However, change must be managed carefully, and not brought about in a chaotic way. Not only do we need to show people, in a transparent way, where change is leading, we need to lay down clearly the route that will take us there and the various steps we will take along that route. People are naturally wary of change. They need to be convinced that if they leave the comfort-zone of the present system, they will arrive at a better place in the future.

One way of doing that is to provide people with the route, the steps involved and as much information as possible about the changes that lie ahead. When the necessary information is not available, the gap that is left is filled by anxiety, leading to resistance to change and making change much more difficult.

Unfortunately, that has been the history of this process to date. Key information necessary to assess the planned change has not been made available when sought and has been forthcoming only at the last minute. One Member has already referred to the fact that it has proven extremely difficult for the Education Committee to get the information that it requires to perform its work. Important policies, pivotal to the Minister's proposals, are even now being kept under wraps, although time is running out rapidly.

It is not only the man and woman in the street who are complaining; some of the main education providers are openly expressing anxieties about the lack of information. In particular, we need to see the detail of the Minister's sustainable schools policy, which will be the bedrock of area-based planning. Consultation ended last Easter, yet we still have not had sight of the policy, nor have we seen the policy on area-based planning, which is the linchpin of the Minister's proposals.

Time is of the essence: education providers need to start planning. Perhaps the Minister will enlighten us when she responds to the motion; I hope that she does. She promised to return with a statement this month. Today may be the day; I hope that it is. We must not

underestimate the level of confusion in the Committee over the future of education. People want to know what is happening: parents want to know what the future holds, how education in their area will be organised and how change will affect their children.

1.30 pm

Mr S Wilson: Does the Member find it odd that, in today's interview in the 'Belfast Telegraph', the Minister appears to believe that there is no concern among parents and that they are happy to wait because they are so excited about the changes that she is introducing?

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for making that point. Only yesterday, at an event in Newry, I spoke to a principal of a post-primary school, who reflected precisely the point that the Member has just made. Not only do parents want to know what is happening, but teachers want to know how the changes will affect their schools. Education providers want the tools and the policies that are necessary to bring about change.

People are asking whether the educational estate can accommodate the Minister's proposals in the short term. Can schools be reorganised to fit the Minister's proposals in the time that is available? The main cause of contention remains the transfer from primary to post-primary schools. That issue lacks clarity, and until selection at 14 is properly provided for, it looks as though the focus on transfer at age 11 will remain for the foreseeable future. Where will the resources, which will undoubtedly be needed to invest in the future, come from? The Minister's proposals have not been costed or included in the Budget. The SDLP has drawn attention to that glaring omission, and that is one of the reasons for our voting against the Budget.

To send this matter to the Executive would risk its being gridlocked in the mass of other business with which they are dealing. That would further increase delay, which none of us wants. This issue must be handled with openness and transparency, and bringing it before the Assembly is the best means of ensuring that all MLAs and the general public have that transparency. The Executive route may push the issue behind closed doors. The SDLP amendment deals with the detail, rather than the politics, of the policy.

Although we support the case for reform, we have serious concerns about the Minister's capacity to deliver change in a way that can restore lost public confidence. Parents are saying that they would almost prefer the continuation of an unfair, inadequate system, rather than face such a degree of uncertainty and anxiety. That is a travesty. Reform requires strong leadership from the Minister to clearly set out the step-by-step process that will be followed as children transfer from primary to post-primary education.

The SDLP wants a high-quality education system that gives equal opportunities to all, promotes educational excellence, widens the horizons and choices of all our young people and does not lead to a postcode lottery. That is not an unattainable ambition, so we call on the Minister to develop and communicate her plans to the Assembly forthwith. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Miss McIlveen: I support the motion. It has been almost three months since the Minister's blurred vision was foisted on the Assembly. According to her, the final transfer test will be held in nine months. The clocking is ticking, Minister. This matter must be addressed urgently, and the delay on the part of the Minister helps no one. Some children are already in the preparatory years for the transition, but face the uncertainty that has been created by the Minister. It is no exaggeration to say that confusion will turn to panic.

Ideally, there would be no need for the motion. From hearing the concerns of my constituents, it is quite apparent that deep consternation runs throughout the community as a result of the Minister's creation of a vacuum. Even worse, it appears that she has adopted a dilatory strategy in some attempt to present the Assembly with a *fait accompli* for her proposals for education. Such matters may be handled in that way in a Marxist state, but we live in a democracy. The failure of the Minister to properly address the Education Committee, and her petulant behaviour before it in the Senate Chamber on 31 January 2008, is there for all to read in the Official Report.

The Minister should, by now, have provided us all with a pair of special glasses so that we can see her vision, or she should, at least, have placed legislation before us to debate. However, all we have had is the Minister's charade before the Committee, where, once again, she sought to filibuster her way through awkward questioning and to criticise, in some vain attempt to deflect attention from herself.

The Committee would be failing in its role if it did not seek answers from the Minister, and the Chairperson of the Committee would be failing in his role if he did not express the Committee's views on events that have been unfolding over the past few months. Thankfully, the Chairperson and the Committee have not been found wanting. However, the same cannot be said of the Minister.

As the Minister should know, the DUP secured a veto at St Andrews over proposals that she may seek to introduce, such as excluding educational criteria as one of the options open to schools when deciding on entrance requirements. In the absence of alternative proposals, that leaves us with the default position that academic selection will remain.

On a previous occasion, I quoted to the Minister from paragraph 20 of the explanatory notes to the Northern

Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006. Section 21 of the Act amended The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. I shall take this opportunity to remind her of what that section provided for:

"In the event of the restoration of the devolved institutions on this date, the commencement of the provision abolishing academic selection would be subject to an affirmative resolution of the Assembly."

The date in question was 28 March 2007. If the Minister does nothing else today, she should at least advise the Assembly and the people of Northern Ireland that what the explanatory notes state is the case. That would ease the concerns of parents and pupils, and it would permit teachers to prepare those children in their foundation years. If she fails to do that, she will merely perpetuate the confusion and uncertainty that have been the hallmarks of her tenure to date.

It says something when all the parties represented on the Committee — apart from members from her party — are unified in their criticism of the Minister. There comes a time when we must ask whether she is competent to hold the post.

It will come as no surprise to the Minister that I share the concerns of the parents and teachers to whom I have spoken since her announcement. It is no exaggeration to state that she is gambling with our children's future. We have all received her Department's consultation document, titled 'Every School A Good School', yet her vision is to downgrade our excellent schools. The focus should be on those schools that are failing, not on destroying those schools that are succeeding and producing excellent results. Her vague proposals have thrown up huge concerns around postcode lotteries, budgets, sustainability of schools, timescales, transition periods and independent admission tests, among many other issues.

I do not hold out a great deal of hope that we will be provided with greater clarity after today's debate. When the Minister speaks in the Assembly, we hear the generalised platitudes, and criticisms of the DUP and the Committee for Education. We will again hear about the world-class education system that she wants to establish, but I doubt that we will receive clarification. Of course, as ever, I am willing to be surprised by the Minister.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am disappointed that the motion was tabled for today, and I am disappointed in the Alliance Party and by the SDLP amendment. Sometimes it is difficult to know whether the Committee for Education is a Committee or a branch of the DUP, given the way in which Sammy Wilson runs it. It seems that the other political parties on the Committee are being led by the nose by Sammy and the DUP on the issue.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member clarify whether he confuses his ability to represent his party's point of

view and to defend his Minister in Committee with his attitude to other Committee members?

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for that intervention. The SDLP and the Alliance Party tell us that they are against academic selection and that they want change, yet they proceed to introduce motions such as this one. There is no confusion about the issue.

Powerful forces are trying to prevent change, because they do not want the type of change that Caitríona Ruane is trying to bring about. People are using it to try to stop change. Some Committee members are not standing up and letting their voices be heard on the issue; they are letting the DUP dominate the Committee, and that is wrong.

Two weeks ago, suggestions were made to the Committee on how to lessen the antagonism between it and the Minister. It was proposed that a closed meeting be held, at which there would be no time limit and to which people could bring their concerns and raise the issues that we are talking about here — the Minister's proposals — but the Committee voted against it. One must ask why the Committee voted against such a meeting. Members want to score political points, and they have come to the Chamber today to do the same thing.

Mr S Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member said that I was leading the Committee by the nose, but I was not even there that day. Is the Member suggesting that I led the Committee by remote control?

Mr Butler: He might have, yes.

We must get to the heart of the matter and consider what the issue is about. There is no confusion about it. People talk about the need for clarity: Caitríona Ruane is involved in a process of consultation with stakeholders. She has said that she will introduce proposals in relation to area planning within weeks. The debate is a distraction from that, and it does not disguise the fact that the Committee for Education is still at loggerheads with the Minister and still trying to undermine her proposals. The Committee should be responding to Caitríona Ruane's request for proposals and positive contributions.

The Education Committee also discussed what it could and could not agree on, but that was shouted down, because nobody wanted to have that discussion. That also makes us question why we are here.

Members should know that a lot of change is going ahead. The entitlement framework, the revised curriculum and the demographics are moving in the direction of a need for an education system that is fit for the twenty-first century. No other country in western Europe uses academic selection. It is only here that we want to cling on to an outdated, discriminatory form of education. I urge the Assembly to await the proposals that Caitríona Ruane will bring to the Assembly. She says that she wants to get agreement; the Committee should also

agree to having a private meeting with the Minister at which a lot of issues can be addressed, rather than having meeting after meeting under a spotlight. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: I speak for the Ulster Unionist Party, and I do not have a chain through my nose. There may be agreement on various issues, but I am able to speak for myself and the party.

The disappointing thing about this debate is that the Minister will not listen: she will not listen to me; she will not listen to the Committee Chairperson; she will not listen to the Assembly; she will not listen to the Executive; and she will not listen to the people. That is why there is risk. If she will not listen to all those people, perhaps she will listen to the experts. As befits an education debate, I have a book, from which I shall quote:

"Now, we have got education and there is a debate all over the country whether this education is adequate to the needs of society or the needs of our young people. I am one of those who always believe that education needs a thorough overhauling. But at the same time, I think that everything in our education is not bad, that even the present education has produced very fine men and women, specially scientists ... One of the biggest responsibilities of the educated women today is how to synthesize what has been valuable ... in our ancient traditions with what is good ... in modern thought."?

It is irresponsible to throw out everything and to try to change in two years what should take 10 years to change.

1.45 pm

I considered and talked to people about other matters. Equality is often mentioned and when reading 'Education Policy in Britain', which I recommend to the Minister, I came across a famous dictum by the great socialist historian and political thinker R H Tawney, from his classic work 'Equality':

"What a wise parent would desire for his or her own children, so a nation, in so far as it is wise, would desire for all children."

That raises questions about the Minister's choices in relation to this matter.

In the past, I have quoted from 'Scottish Education: Post-Devolution' because it deals at length with the subject of failing to consult. On page 82, it states that, despite distributing 27,000 copies of a document:

"In effect, very few changes were made as a result of the consultation stage."

We cannot allow that to happen again.

Achieving consensus does not mean doing what I say, or else. Consensus is about talking to people and providing leadership. People often ask me the difference between leadership and management. If everything is clear and the way ahead is certain, good management is required. However, if not, consensus must be built. That is genuine leadership, and that is precisely what we are not getting.

"Respect" is another key word. The Minister does not respect Members, the statutory roles of the Committee and the Assembly, parents, teachers, and the pupils who produce fantastic results. The BBC reported:

"As usual, entries from Northern Ireland easily outperformed the rest of the UK, with a third (33.2%) getting A grades and a pass rate of 98%"

What could be better than that? Why are we attempting to fix the entire system? If one considers GCSEs, the results in Northern Ireland — 8.2% at grade A*; 24.8% at grade A* to grade A; and 72.4% at grade A* to grade C — are better than those in England and Wales, or any other comparable system.

It concerns me that the Minister believes that she has found a way of bringing about changes to the transfer system without referring to the rest of us. In her meeting with the Committee, when discussing area planning, article 101 of The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 was mentioned, which, provided that the Minister agrees, gives the Department complete power to dictate what anybody and everybody should do. That is not democratic. Even if I agreed with the Minister's proposals, she will not be able to implement them within her two-year timescale. I oppose what she is attempting to do not because she is a member of Sinn Féin but because she is absolutely wrong.

Mr Storey: Yet again, 10 months after the restoration of devolution, we are in the Chamber discussing this matter, and the Education Minister still has not taken any decisions. Sinn Féin told us that it was keen to have the devolved Administration re-established. However, having been re-established, Sinn Féin's Minister of Education has failed and failed again.

Every time the Minister of Education is asked detailed or probing questions about her proposals — or, rather, non-proposals — for post-primary education, she begins by saying — and, no doubt, we will hear the same today — that this is a good day for education and we can achieve consensus, because, of course, she is the Minister of consensus and equality. She wants us all to share and to have an all-embracing policy for the children — we have heard it all before. The truth is different. This Minister prevents, rather than seeks, consensus, and, given our experience during the past 10 months, the evidence is indisputable, and it has become abundantly clear that she has failed to achieve consensus.

First, as has been said, there is the Minister's attitude to the Committee for Education. She refuses to answer the Committee's questions, which are legitimate questions. On one occasion, she arrived late and then took up half of the Committee's time in making a meandering, meaningless and irrelevant opening statement. She tells Committee members that we do not have the warrant, remit, power, authority or competence to hold her to account or to scrutinise her

oversight of the Department of Education. She refuses to add the necessary detail to her proposals in order that the Committee can assess them.

Then, of course, we have Mr Butler, whom I thought for a few weeks was going to be replaced by John O'Dowd. It seemed as though the Minister's minder was not big enough, so they had to bring in someone with a bit more stature to try to intimidate us a wee bit more. Well, it will not work. Mr Butler tells us that the Committee should have a meeting with the Minister behind closed doors. I remind the Minister that when the Committee challenged her about confidentiality, she told us that she could not divulge what the stakeholders were saying because it was confidential. Why did she do that? She did it because her party still likes to have its politics the way it ran its terrorist organisation — behind the hedges and in the dark. I assure the Minister that there will be no behind-the-hedges agreements, nor any closed-door sessions. Committee business will be carried out in public so that everyone can see what is going on.

Secondly, we know about the Minister's attitude to the Assembly and to the existing legislation — my colleague Ms McIlveen already mentioned that. The DUP secured a veto on academic selection at the St Andrews negotiations. That position is clear, and it is enshrined in legislation. Whether the Minister wants to face up to that or not, it is obvious that her new minder faced up to it. John O'Dowd acknowledged as much on the BBC's 'Hearts and Minds' programme, when he said that academic selection may be protected, but that there was no obligation on the Department to fund it. Whatever his views about funding on that occasion, John O'Dowd did at least admit that what has been sticking in the Minister's teeth all these months is that she cannot end academic selection, because the law is against her.

Instead of accepting political realities, the Minister continues to try to headbutt the brick wall of legal protection that has been given to academic selection. First, she attempted to deny that that protection exists, then she tried to bully the rest of us into abandoning it, and then she looked for ways to get around it. By doing this, she has shown that she has neither interest nor commitment to consensus or to the long-term well-being of pupils in Northern Ireland.

Finally, there is the Executive. Why, at the most recent Executive meeting, did the Minister not agree to the creation of a subcommittee? We would appreciate answers from the Minister, rather than a prepared speech.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat. In her statement to the Assembly in December, the Minister of Education gave us her vision of a system that will transform our

outdated and unequal education system. She laid before the Assembly a vision of an educational future that will ensure that the equal rights of all children are at the heart of the new system. Despite the fact that the Minister made that statement, followed by a further statement in January, we find ourselves coming back to this debate time after time. I wonder whether it is not that the statements lacked detail, but that people do not like what they are hearing.

Mr B McCrea: There is a lack of detail, but there is also some fundamental agreement. Would the Member not agree that it would be better if we engaged properly to discuss these matters, but that we cannot do so in the absence of anything to talk about?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his intervention. My colleague Paul Butler made a proposal in the Committee for Education to address that point and get agreement, but it was not supported. Today is like 'Groundhog Day'; time after time, we have the same debate.

I know that parents have concerns — of course they do. What is most precious to parents is their children's future. As I have said before, my child will transfer in 2010, and I am confident that the new system will ensure that he fulfils his potential. In saying that, I am not trying to dismiss the concerns of parents, pupils or teachers, because we must address those genuine concerns — they are more genuine than the sense of panic that some Members are trying to create. In her speech, Michelle McIlveen said that confusion is turning to panic. Perhaps she and her colleagues could stop feeding into that agenda — it is they who are trying to create the confusion and panic.

The Minister is working through a democratic process, and she has said that when the consultation with the stakeholders is finished, she will report to the Committee and to the Assembly.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way, and I appreciate her reference to a democratic process. Does that include the agreement and the arrangements that were made at St Andrews on the retention of academic selection?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his intervention. In her visionary statement, the Minister outlined how she intends to address the issue. She will appear before the Executive and the Committee as we move forward and she makes more statements on area-based planning and all the other issues that are involved in post-primary transfer. In her statement in January, the Minister said that she will provide more information on area-based planning in the next few weeks. I look forward to hearing that information, and I urge Members to respond to it constructively rather than engage in the constant whining that we hear from the same Members, time and again.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for giving way; I realise that she has done so a couple of times already.

Is the issue under discussion today clearly not quite different? It is not simply a case of the same Members complaining again and again. Some of those who agree with the direction in which the Minister is headed — including those in my own party — are extremely concerned about how we can reach our destination within the time available.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her intervention. I accept that Members have genuine concerns and that they want to get to the bottom of some issues. That is what the Committee is trying to do, and the Minister is trying to address the issues that have been raised.

Today's debate has taken away from the focus of the issue. It has been about attacking and insulting the Minister. Basil McCrea talked about respect. However, respect must also be shown to the Minister; it cannot just be demanded from her. Today's debate has not been helpful in our attempts to move forward and introduce those long overdue changes to our education system. I urge Members to take a more proactive approach to the issue and to engage with the Minister in trying to address it. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr S Wilson: Despite the comments from Sinn Féin Members, I believe that this debate is very necessary. The Minister made her declaration to the Assembly in December 2007, which led to more questions than answers. Up to now, the Committee's questions have not been frivolous; they have been serious questions. The Committee has put around 72 questions to the Minister on her comments and vision. The proposer of the motion Mr Lunn said earlier that he wanted to see some meat on the bones. My difficulty is that I do not even see the bones at the moment. We still have some vague idea of what will happen, and getting the bones might just be a start.

Of course, the Minister and her party are running away from her responsibilities. Like other Ministers in the Executive, it appears that when the Minister gets into difficulty, she blames everybody but herself. She blames the media, the Committee, the Chairman, scaremongers and Assembly Members. The difficulty is that the Minister is not facing up to her responsibility.

The Committee wants to work with the Minister. Its role is to assist and advise, but it can only do so when it knows the background papers and the information on which the Minister is basing her policy. She refuses to give Committee members answers to those questions. How can we assist if we are not given the means by which to do so? Of course, it is easy to say that it is all my fault. I wish that I could lead the Committee by the nose. I sometimes wish that I could get rings through

the noses of members of my party, let alone members of other parties.

That is an easy jibe for the Minister to make. However, some strong, independently minded Members are on that Committee.

The warning to the Minister should be that rather than pointing her finger at the media and everyone else, she would be better to ask herself why every party is opposing her. However, as Naomi Long — a member for East Belfast — said, those parties include those who actually support what she is doing.

2.00 pm

The Minister's other defence has been to say that there are no problems or concerns. It appears that not only is the Minister paranoid about everyone else, she is also deluded. The Minister should read the newspapers and the letters from parents in those newspapers, and she should listen to constituents. Of course there are concerns — people are uncertain about what is going to happen.

What the Minister is doing will have implications. If she proceeds in the way that she has done, everyone will be kept in the dark until November 2009. That will cause immense problems for receiving schools, primary schools, parents and so on.

Mr B McCrea: Much of the work that must be done after any solution is found will have to take place in primary 6, given that any new measures will have to be implemented early in primary 7. Bearing that in mind, does the Member agree that it is important that schools, teachers and parents are made aware of what is happening before June 2008, which is merely a few months away? We cannot wait for one year; something must be done now.

Mr S Wilson: I agree. However, unfortunately, all that the Minister has told us is that parents will know "in time". I notice that during her interview with the 'Belfast Telegraph' she repeated that phrase on five occasions. However, she will not define what "in time" means. Indeed, there have been suggestions that the issue will still not be resolved by November 2009.

There will also be implications for secondary schools. If there is a free-for-all, the grammar-school brand will ensure that places in those schools are filled. It will be the secondary schools that lose out — the very schools that the Minister says that she wants to defend. Instead of having a mix of vocational, academic and general-education schools, there may be a drift towards pupils attending one kind of school.

The last effect will be that the Minister will single-handedly bring the Assembly into disrepute. People believed that devolution would give local politicians the opportunity to address local problems quickly. Owing to her procrastination, dithering and unwillingness to

face up to her failures, the problem will not be resolved in time. All Assembly Members will suffer as a result.

Sinn Féin has appointed a Minister who is a one-woman demolition team. She wants to demolish education, and, in turn, she will then demolish the Assembly. Sinn Féin should ask her to go and appoint someone who can actually do the job. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs M Bradley: When Members talk about the proposed changes to the education system, I feel as though I am experiencing a distinct case of *déjà vu*. Although the issue has been discussed many times before, the Minister has not yet given us a workable and effective blueprint. Parents and teachers approach me every week about the future of their children who are currently in primary 5, primary 6 and primary 7. However, I still cannot answer their questions.

I am disappointed that there seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel regarding the relationship between the Minister and the Committee for Education. The publicity that that is generating is not helping confidence or the work of the Committee.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member may recall the altercation that I had with the Minister about her answering my questions in Irish. The Minister is now sending her responses to questions for written answer in Irish, which she had not done prior to the Committee meeting in which the altercation took place. I have no idea what the first paragraph of one particular answer means. Does the Member agree that that practice further alienates the Minister from the Committee and that it will not help to get the consensus that she continues to tell us that she is so interested in?

Mrs M Bradley: I do not have a problem as long as there is a translation. However, it is important that the Minister clarifies her position on how she proposes to implement her blueprint. For example, what priority will the Department of Finance and Personnel give to the extended years of accommodation that every Northern Ireland primary school must provide for children aged 11 to 14?

New premises were recently built at some schools, albeit to fit the needs of the existing education system in which primary 7 children leave and go to secondary or grammar schools. If the Committee for Education cannot get information, when can principals and teachers expect to be made aware of how this proposal will impact on their role and service delivery?

For some time, my colleague Dominic Bradley has been asking pertinent questions about that situation, but no answers have been forthcoming. As politicians, parents and grandparents, we constantly seek to reassure children that everything will be OK and that we — as,

supposedly, more mature adults — will take care of things; not so, in this case. The adults are just as confused and disillusioned as most of the children concerned, and their parents are totally frustrated.

As politicians, we are charged with translating the decisions of Ministers on behalf of the general public and with answering questions on how those decisions will impact on their daily lives. Unfortunately, in this case, the blind have been leading the blind. It is not good enough that the Committee for Education cannot be given answers to questions that are far from new. We have been asking those questions since May 2007; parents, teachers and pupils have been asking them for longer than that.

I support the amendment and ask the Minister to furnish the Assembly with the relevant details to enable us to reach a position in which we can offer some information to the concerned stakeholders. Some of those are 10- and 11-year-old children, who are becoming more and more stressed and uneasy as each day, week and month passes us by without furtherance.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I had hoped today to hear a debate on post-transfer systems; however, instead I have heard the views of individual members of the Committee for Education on the Minister of Education.

I clarify for Mr Storey that I am not here as the Minister's bodyguard. I assume that she does not need one and that verbal attacks will not turn into physical ones. I always rely on my brain instead of my brawn, and I find that my brain — as well as my brawn — soars above his. I have no difficulty in engaging in any debate on any subject.

Had I signed up to the motion that the Minister lacks clarity and that details of her proposals must be brought forward, my speech would have included my proposals and my vision of the future, and the visions of the future of the DUP, the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP. However, I have heard none of that.

The duty of an opposition — whether upper or lower case — is to present alternatives. The reason — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr O'Dowd: The reason my colleagues opposite have brought forward no proposals is that they have none. Their plan is to attack the Minister, because they know that they have failed miserably in academic selection. The vast majority of people are opposed to the retention of the 11-plus. Their mission failed, so their next tack is to go down the road of attacking the Minister and causing confusion. Some of the publications on our news-stands feed into that confusion, and one could almost believe in the “old school tie” with regard

to the grammar school network. Some of the newspaper headlines are factually inaccurate.

Mr Storey: When I reminded the Member on ‘Hearts and Minds’ about the statement by Cardinal Brady — not a card-carrying member of the DUP — criticising the Minister, Mr O'Dowd said that there would be clarification on that statement. Did that clarification ever materialise? I did not see it in any newspaper.

Mr O'Dowd: Mr Storey must have cancelled his subscription to ‘The Irish News’, because it included a belated clarification from the cardinal — as with many publications, not on the front page, where the incorrect article had been printed, but in the back pages somewhere. I am sure that, if Mr Storey wishes to phone the cardinal for his views, the cardinal will take the call, considering Mr Storey's interest in education.

We have ended up with a debate on the relationship between the Committee and the Minister. The Minister has offered to meet the Committee again. She has met the Committee Chairperson on a regular basis. However, the Committee has refused to meet the Minister unless the meeting is in public. Is the purpose of such a meeting to gain publicity — a few column inches in the ‘Belfast Telegraph’, ‘The Irish News’, or other morning newspapers — or is it about bringing this matter to a resolution that meets the needs of the children who are going through the education system?

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, Mary, I am nearly out of time.

Some people are concerned with building egos, not education. If the Committee is serious about engaging with the Minister, it is best done behind closed doors, away from the glare of the television cameras and all the attention, so that Members and the Minister can speak freely and engage properly. That has been the case with all the issues that we have had to resolve in this society. Certain Members have one eye on the camera in the corner of the Senate Chamber, instead of on the issues at hand. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Dowd: That is what is really going on here: the seeking of media attention. Basil McCrea said that the Minister needs to listen. She is listening; that is the process that is going on now. As set out in her speech of 4 December 2007, the Minister is engaging with all the key stakeholders. The Education Committee is one of those stakeholders, but the others have not chosen to hold their discussions in the glare of the media spotlight. They have chosen to hold talks in a mature, reflective manner, and those talks are ongoing. Let us go through the process properly.

On 4 December 2007, the Minister said that there would be engagement. There is engagement, and in no circumstances — despite the headlines in certain

newspapers — will the current situation continue until November 2009. It will be resolved long before then, and I ask the Education Committee to play its role. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. This is a vital debate. Everyone is wondering when we are going to get started on the real debate. The Minister must bring her plans for post-primary transfer in 2009 before the Assembly. Any further delay in announcing how she is going to roll out the new system or how it is to be implemented will have a knock-on effect on the current P5 and P6 classes. Teachers will not be sufficiently prepared for the new system.

There are always children who suffer when changes are made to the education system. However, a longer lead-up to change, with preparation on the part of the teachers who are to deliver that change, can minimise the negative effects on the children. The roll-out of the revised Northern Ireland curriculum is a case in point. P1 and P5 teachers were expected to deliver the new curriculum this year with minimal training — in some cases, just two days. Principals were not included in the training sessions, and had to rely on feedback from the teachers involved. It is unacceptable for school principals to be working without a proper overview of the system. The laptops and whiteboards needed for the implementation of the curriculum were delivered long after the start of the school year. In some primary schools in my area, they still have not been delivered.

If such shambolic implementation is repeated with the new post-primary transfer system, all our children will suffer. The Minister must reveal her proposals for change as a matter of urgency. Principals and teachers must be made aware of the proposals and given adequate preparation and training as soon as possible. Parents must be included in the process in order to retain their confidence in the education system. Children should not suffer because the Minister refuses to make her proposals available to us all. Go raibh maith agat.

2.15 pm

Mr Ross: I listened to Mr O'Dowd's contribution, during which he asked for the alternatives to the current proposals. The entire basis for this debate is that there are no current proposals. The motion once again calls on the Minister to bring her proposals for post-primary transfer before the House to ease the concerns of parents, pupils and teachers throughout Northern Ireland, who simply do not know what is happening.

However, in calling on the Minister to introduce such proposals, we are assuming that the Minister knows what she is going to do. Previously in the Chamber, we have heard the Minister of Education referred to as "the Minister for mess and confusion". Perhaps she should be known as "the Minister for mess, confusion and evasion", because she will not

detail her grand plans, and she has an uncanny ability to refuse to answer questions.

I am not a member of the Committee for Education, but there is no guarantee that being on that Committee allows Members an opportunity to question the Minister, because she tends to avoid such circumstances, as my colleagues have said. The only way in which I can submit questions to the Minister is by tabling questions for written or oral answer.

We have heard about the gains that the DUP made at St Andrews. On a related matter, on 11 November 2007, I tabled a question for written answer to the Minister to ask whether the principle of academic selection was safeguarded in legislation. I am still waiting for the answer 100 days later, despite the fact that the Minister stated in another answer that she answers questions, on average, within 11 days. We shall see whether the Minister answers that question today.

Mr Storey: I can confirm what the Member has said. I submitted a question to the Minister of Education for priority written answer, which should be answered within two days. I received the answer 14 days later. That demonstrates the priority that the Minister gives to answering questions.

Mr Ross: That is absolutely right, and I am sure that other Members have similar experiences. Perhaps the Minister knows the answer to the question that I asked her on 11 November 2007 but does not want to tell me the answer because she does not like it.

I heard Dominic Bradley talk about change, and a US presidential race is taking place in which Barack Obama's campaign is centred on change. Perhaps the change that we really need in Northern Ireland is a change of Education Minister.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Ross: It is a disgrace that there are no plans in place for the ending of the current transfer arrangements in 2009, despite the fact that children have entered school years during which preparation for the transfer has already begun, as the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Basil McCrea said.

Already, as predicted, parents have bought houses in the catchment areas of the most popular schools, which means that families with money have an advantage over those who do not. That is not a fair system.

Although there will be different views on how to move forward, there is agreement that the Minister is making a mess of this matter. We must be able to scrutinise detailed proposals so that the real debate on the future of education can begin. I have no doubt that we need a fair system that matches pupils to the school of their needs. The fairest way to do that is through a system of academic selection. Given that academic selection is safeguarded in legislation — perhaps I

have answered my own question of 11 November 2007 — any proposals should include that option for schools.

All-ability comprehensive schools do not work. They have not worked in England, and they will not work here. I was interested to hear the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, Sue Ramsey, say during a meeting of that Committee in the Senate Chamber on 30 January, that one size does not fit all. She was speaking about children who have been in care, who often start from a lower educational base than most other children, and who therefore need education that is pitched at a level that suits them. I agree with her, but it is a pity that that sentiment does not extend to debates such as this one. I argue that post-primary education is no different.

Children are not all the same, and do not all have the same educational ability or aptitude. We must ensure that children receive the education that best suits their needs. The Minister's proposals should reflect that. If they do not, she knows that her plans cannot make it through this House.

We already know that the Minister will not be able to slip her plans through the back door, as some Members have suggested. Such significant or controversial matters must be decided by the Executive. That is one of the difficulties that we have with the SDLP amendment, which does not mention the Executive.

The Minister must recognise reality. She must stop being stubborn and obstructive. All the parties that are represented in the Assembly must unite in a call for the Minister to start doing what she is paid to do. She must introduce proposals that not only recognise the legal and political realities, but which will gain the support of all the parties, give clear guidance to pupils, parents and teachers, and ensure that her incompetence thus far does not tarnish the reputation of the Assembly. I am hopeful that the SDLP will withdraw its amendment so that a common position can be found among all the parties, which is what the Minister should be aiming for.

Some aspects of the amendment are to be welcomed. Enhancing equality is important not just for grammar schools, but for secondary schools. I am also a strong advocate of equality of opportunity.

All children are not the same, but they should be afforded equal opportunities, including equal opportunities to get into good schools. Academic selection offers those opportunities. Its retention would also protect against a postcode lottery, but, as I have argued in the Chamber before, "lottery" may be the wrong phraseology to use, because it suggests that everyone has an equal chance of success.

I support the motion, behind which I hope the House can unite.

Mr Gallagher: I support the amendment, which stands in the name of my colleague Dominic Bradley. The amendment focuses on some key issues that must be tackled. It is disappointing to hear what amounts to a sense of paranoia from those Sinn Féin Members who have spoken so far. To them, a debate about education somehow or other represents an attack on the Minister. That is a very poor response to make in an open discussion on the need for clear proposals on the way forward for post-primary transfer.

As Members know, our education system has significant strengths, such as our high levels of attainment and our high academic standards, particularly in our grammar schools. We have, however, a disproportionate number of secondary schools in which low attainment is combined with social disadvantage. That situation must be resolved as quickly as possible.

Statistics from the Bain Report, along with other recent reviews of our education system, highlight the need for a clear way forward on post-primary transfer, falling enrolments and, from next year, the curriculum entitlement framework. There are about 157,000 children in our primary schools, but that figure will have dropped to 149,000 by 2030. That trend will create difficulties and demands from all school authorities — in the controlled, maintained and other sectors — for a fresh and innovative response. Not least, if some school closures are to be avoided, that trend demands the possibility of some cross-sectoral co-operation. The Bain Report took a view on the main criteria for viability, identifying collaboration and co-operation as alternatives to closure. It did, however, contain a key warning that the benefits of all that co-operation should be balanced against costs and manageability.

It is clear that that warning implies that many small schools will be closed, and, as we know, the issue of small-school closures is not that simple. Other factors must be considered when schools close, such as the loss of community identity and the cost to the local economy.

Mr S Wilson: The Member makes an important point about small schools. Does he accept that, in order to save them from closure, it will require some of the many sectoral interests' sacred cows being set aside? We could then have shared sites, shared campuses and shared uses of schools. Schools themselves might even blur the differences between one sector and another.

Mr Gallagher: I agree with much of what the Member says. However, what he suggests will have to emerge over time rather than overnight.

We cannot ignore the costs to the environment and the implications of carbon emissions when we begin to bus thousands of children into heavily congested county towns and some of our urban centres.

The experience in England should remind us that a changeover to large schools does not always deliver

benefits. Many educationalists in the United States now accept that to go to a large school is a mistake and that small schools are better. We should not ignore what is happening elsewhere. If the Department's policy is to press ahead with school closures, to close our small schools will be a mistake.

It would be a big mistake that everyone would come to regret. Those schools are at the heart of communities, and to persist in measuring them by how much they cost, but ignoring their value — and there is a hint of that in the Bain Report — would be a short-sighted policy. I agree that costs must be factored into all policies but, in doing so, care must be taken not to revert to Margaret Thatcher's education policy: her officials knew the cost of everything and the value of nothing, and people are still living with the consequences of that policy. New structures must be developed urgently, but I do not have time to go into the detail of those now.

Mr Speaker: As Members know, Question Time begins at 2.30 pm. I suggest that Members take their ease until then. After Question Time, the debate will resume with the Minister's response.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Clostridium Difficile

1. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action his Department is taking to prevent further outbreaks of clostridium difficile. (AQO 2222/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): In January 2008, my Department issued guidance to all health and social care trusts on the lessons that have been learned from the outbreak of clostridium difficile in the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust. My Department also issued all doctors with guidance on good practice in the prevention and control of clostridium difficile.

On 25 January 2008, I announced a £9 million package of measures aimed at fighting healthcare-associated infections, which adds to the wide range of measures already in place and includes single rooms for new hospitals; unannounced inspections of all hospitals; restrictions on hospital visiting; a dress code for all healthcare staff; a regional hand-hygiene campaign; rapid response cleaning times at all hospitals; quarterly publication of infection-control performance; and five pharmacists to promote the prudent use of antibiotics.

I also announced a review by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA), which will focus on the circumstances that contributed to the recent outbreak. The review will be independent, rigorous, comprehensive and thorough and will identify any lessons that the Health Service can learn. The central purpose of the review is to help to prevent similar outbreaks.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for his response, which dealt with a number of high-level issues. However, I have a concern that arose recently when a relation was terminally ill in a Northern Health and Social Care Trust hospital and not because I have relations employed by the trust. The Minister spoke about the rapid response cleaning times at hospitals. However, the Northern Health and Social Care Trust does not employ cleaners outside normal working hours. Is it not the case that that

is contributing to the hygiene problems in our hospitals? Does the Minister agree that that is a case of being penny wise and pound foolish?

Mr McGimpsey: I referred to rapid response cleaning teams, which are being established at all hospitals. Hygiene is an important factor, and — in its response — the Northern Health and Social Care Trust is looking at the prudent use of antibiotics, hand hygiene, environmental cleaning, isolation, cohort nursing, and the use of protective equipment. The Northern Health and Social Care Trust response has been adequate, but I have also brought in the RQIA to carry out a thorough and robust investigation. As Members are aware, I have not ruled out the possibility of a public inquiry once that investigation is complete.

Mr Craig: Is the Minister content that the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust is tracking deaths adequately, specifically those where *clostridium difficile* is a contributory factor?

Will the Minister comment on the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust's proposal to close obstetrics at Lagan Valley Hospital, and whether the 1,200 births there every year can be accommodated elsewhere?

Mr McGimpsey: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust hospitals and institutions will follow set guidelines on recording deaths. The Chief Medical Officer has issued fresh guidelines on what is recorded on death certificates. As far as I am aware, the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust will follow those guidelines.

I have not seen any plans that the trust has for obstetrics at Lagan Valley Hospital, or anywhere else. When I see such plans, I will discuss them with the trust and will then be in a position to comment.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his replies. It has been brought to my attention that some families are finding out for the first time, from death certificates, that family members had suffered from *clostridium difficile* — they have then been confused about the circumstances of deaths. What importance does the Minister attach to the role of infection-control nurses? Is he satisfied that they will have the remit, the resources and the powers that they require to achieve his stated goal?

Mr McGimpsey: Yes, I attach great importance to their role. Obviously, I am advised and guided by experts in that field. Several measures are in place, such as the action plan, a change in culture, the ward sisters' charter and mandatory surveillance programmes for the range of infections, including *clostridium difficile*.

I also refer the Member to my reply to Mr Ford's remarks about infection control, prudent use of antibiotics and environmental cleaning, which are all key areas. We are doing what we could reasonably be expected to

do. I visited the isolation ward in Antrim Area Hospital recently and talked to staff. I was very impressed with the way in which they are implementing measures. In order to be certain, however, I have announced the review to be conducted by RQIA, which I anticipate will take 12 weeks. That will allow me to give the Member the full and definitive assurance that he seeks.

Medical Treatment: Older Members of the Community

2. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to ensure that older members of the community (i) receive fair and equal treatment in hospitals; and (ii) are not disqualified from required treatment as a result of their age. (AQO 2196/08)

Mr McGimpsey: Decisions to admit someone to hospital, and his or her subsequent treatment, are determined by clinical factors that take account of the individual patient's condition and circumstances, and consideration of the risks and benefits of particular treatments. A patient's chronological age will not disqualify him or her from receiving the necessary healthcare.

Mr Attwood: The Minister will be aware that a range of concerns exists about the treatment of people based on their age. I look forward to the Minister's comments on how he intends to address the review of fertility treatment. People approaching 40 years of age may not get the early treatment that they need.

Has the Minister's Department undertaken any review of hospital discharge arrangements for vulnerable older people since he came to office, bearing in mind that there appears to be evidence that different arrangements are in place — depending on which trust area a person is in — that govern the discharge of vulnerable older people. That may result in some of those older people being put in jeopardy.

Mr McGimpsey: Mr Attwood is aware that my Department is conducting a review of fertility treatment as a result of a debate that he instigated.

I concur entirely with what the Member said about the discharge arrangements for older people. They should be discharged when it is safe and proper for hospitals to do so. The Member asked whether I have undertaken a review of the discharge process. I would be concerned if inequities existed across Northern Ireland, and procedures and guidance on the matter should be followed. I am not aware of my Department's having conducted such a review since I came to office. However, I will be in touch with the Member on that issue. He is aware that we are developing a range of service frameworks, and although they will automatically cover older people, there is an argument to be made for

a specific framework for older people, and I am looking into that.

However, any framework will not simply relate to discharges. The issue must be dealt with, not least because, by 2015, around 500,000 people in Northern Ireland will be aged 65 and over. We are looking at the demographics, and that is why the Health Service is skewing.

Mr K Robinson: Given that we are striving for parity on health provision across the UK, will the Minister tell us why standards in the national service framework for older people in Great Britain do not apply in Northern Ireland? Will the Minister consider introducing those standards here in the near future?

Mr McGimpsey: I refer Mr Robinson to my previous answer. We are looking at service frameworks. This is the way in which the Health Service in Northern Ireland proceeds with service frameworks: it sets out levels of standards that patients and users should expect.

There is an argument that there should be a service framework for older people, and I am considering that, bearing in mind that service frameworks in any area should automatically cover all patients. There is an argument for a special service framework, which would correspond with the work that has been undertaken by the Health Service in England.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In supporting the call for fair and equal health treatment for senior citizens, and in light of the case of the Strabane pensioner Maureen McGinley, who sustained 34 rib fractures after her death in Altnagelvin Hospital on 3 January 2007, will the Minister tell the House what practical steps he has taken to assure relatives who find themselves in similar circumstances that the bodies of their loved ones are treated with the utmost care, dignity and respect from the point of death? Will he explain what happened to Maureen McGinley's body, before it was cleaned, after her death?

Mr McGimpsey: As I had no advance warning of that particular question, I am unable to comment on what happened to that person at the point of her death in Altnagelvin. However, I will find out what happened, and I will respond to the Member. The case of Maureen McGinley raises issues, but I understand that those issues are being dealt with by the Coroner's Office. As the Member will be aware, the Coroner's Office is part of the Northern Ireland Office, rather than my Department. Therefore, it seems that the Member should direct his question to the Northern Ireland Office.

In response to the other points, I will ask questions about care and respect. However, I cannot get involved in individual cases while a police investigation is ongoing.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to keep their questions short. The object is to get through as many questions as possible.

Mr McClarty: Question 3 — you cannot get any shorter than that.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service: Future Funding

3. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide details of future funding for the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. (AQO 2171/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The proposed funding for the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, net of required efficiencies, for the next three years, will be £79.3 million in 2008-09; £80 million in 2009-10; and £83.1 million in 2010-11. Those sums will provide additional funding to meet pay, non-pay inflation and resources for service developments, including the revenue consequences of planned capital investment. The proposed level of capital investment is £8 million, £9 million and £29 million for the CSR period.

Mr McClarty: I pay tribute to the Minister for being so successful in obtaining increased funding for the Fire and Rescue Service. Will capital investment be made in the redevelopment of fire stations, and will the Minister ensure that Coleraine and Limavady fire stations are included in any such plans?

Mr McGimpsey: The capital budget is as I have stated. The Fire and Rescue Service has completed refurbishment work on Enniskillen, Rathlin and Portadown stations, and work on Armagh station is under way. In the next three years, there are plans to refurbish Antrim, Cushendall, Fintona, Newtown Stewart and Omagh stations. Coleraine and Limavady stations are on the list. However, I regret to inform the Member that they are not among the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service priorities for the next three years, as things stand. Some 26 stations are in need of replacement, and the capital is not available to do all that we would like to do.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Minister give details of where the £15 million of capital investment that has been allocated to the Ambulance Service will be directed?

Mr McGimpsey: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, as Members know, is separate from the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. I received no notice of the Member's question; however, I am happy to furnish him with the details when they are provided to me.

The Ambulance Service is in a similar situation to the Fire and Rescue Service. For example, the Fire and Rescue Service operates 112 pumping appliances and

replaces those at a rate of 11 a year, so there is a 10% turnover. The Ambulance Service replaces its fleet at the same rate. However, by and large, ambulances operate out of hospitals and medical facilities and do not have dedicated stations. I am happy to write to the Member about the capital provision for ambulances.

Mr Bresland: What assurance can the Minister give that the six retained fire stations in the West Tyrone constituency will be maintained? Can he assure me that the facilities and services provided by those stations will be enhanced?

Mr McGimpsey: I will write to the Member about those six fire stations.

2.45 pm

New Regional Hospital for Children and Women

4. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a timetable for the completion of the new regional hospital for children and women on the site of the Royal Group of Hospitals. (AQO 2230/08)

Mr McGimpsey: I am actively considering all medium- to longer-term strategic investment proposals, including one for the women and children's hospital. In determining final allocations of capital investment funds beyond the comprehensive spending review period and in light of constraints on capital funding, I will carefully consider and prioritise that investment proposal, alongside many others, when we receive it.

It is not possible to provide a timetable for the completion of the new hospital at this stage.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am disappointed with the Minister's answer: I had asked for such a timetable.

Will the Minister confirm that provision of the new regional hospital is a priority for the Department and that he is committed to it? The decision to build the hospital was made more than five years ago and work was expected to begin in May of this year.

Has the Department set aside money for clearing the site so that we can see some progress on the new regional hospital for women and children?

Mr McGimpsey: The capital bill for that development is £404 million; the capital available for the three-year period is £728 million, all of which is already spoken for. We are examining provision of hospitals in the south-west, and other capital projects.

The women and children's hospital on the Royal Victoria Hospital site is one of the Department's priorities, but we have others. One of those is the Ulster Hospital, phase B, the fabric of which is very poor. We are also

examining Craigavon Area Hospital, Daisy Hill Hospital and Altnagelvin Area Hospital. I also give notice that the tower block at Belfast City Hospital requires major investment. There are many large-scale capital projects to finance. One of the key aspects of efficiency is investment. I am examining capital provision, not least for this development.

Advance design work on the women and children's hospital has been done, and some site work may also be started; however, until I am absolutely clear about the time frame for building, I cannot answer the question. I regret that, because there is a need for a women and children's hospital.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Minister comment on the removal of maternity services from Lagan Valley Hospital? How will expectant mothers be provided for in future, given that Craigavon Area Hospital, the Ulster Hospital and the Royal Maternity Hospital are all under pressure? Surely, since Lisburn is a city it should have its own maternity services.

Mr McGimpsey: I refer Mrs Robinson to my previous answer. The maternity units at the Royal Victoria Hospital and the Ulster Hospital are not working to capacity, and Mrs Robinson is well aware of the need for efficiencies. In fact, she is one of those Members who has pressed me hardest to find efficiencies.

Each trust is required to come up with an individual plan for its area. The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has prepared its plans; I have yet to see them, but I will examine them in due course. I will discuss the plans with each trust, but everyone must be well aware that I have to find £700 million by year 3 of the comprehensive spending review, and I have given undertakings to do so. I have been urged time and again to make tough decisions, and there will be some tough decisions to make. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr McGimpsey: By following the efficiency targets that I have set, I am doing what every party in the Executive agreed that I would do. When those plans come through, and I agree them with the trusts, I will seek the support of all those parties that have argued so strongly for efficiency in the Health Service.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his answers. My question has been partly asked and partly answered, but will the Minister provide some clarity on the issue either today or on some other occasion. Although there is some capacity in Belfast hospitals and the surrounding hospitals, the demand created by the closure of the maternity unit at Lagan Valley Hospital would far exceed any spare capacity. Babies are not born on a rota basis; sometimes there is a rush. It depends on the circumstances of how, where and when they are conceived.

Some Members: Ask a question.

Dr McDonnell: My question is simple. There are fluctuations in birth rates. Will the Minister return to the House and reassure Members that the —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Ask a question, please.

Dr McDonnell: Will the spare capacity be able to take up any slack?

Mr McGimpsey: I refer Dr McDonnell to my earlier answer. When I see the plans and examine them, I will be in a position to make my decision. Capacity in the system is crucial.

Downe Hospital

5. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what his assessment is of the future provision of services at Downe Hospital. (AQO 2182/08)

Mr McGimpsey: In keeping with the Department's strategy for acute hospitals developing better services, Downe Hospital is to be developed as an enhanced local hospital. A new multimillion-pound hospital is being constructed on the Ardglass Road in Downpatrick. The new Downe Hospital will be linked to the acute hospital network and will include a 24-hour accident and emergency unit, consultant-led inpatient medical services, acute psychiatry and a dementia unit. A range of day-case, outpatient and diagnostic services will also be provided. The new hospital is on schedule to open in April 2009.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am sure that the people of south Down — *[Interruption.]* — I apologise to Members that my voice is hard to listen to today; I might need to visit the hospital before it opens.

Will the Minister join me in distancing himself from the remarks of the Chairperson of the Health Committee just before Christmas? She suggested that Downe Hospital should have been mothballed to save money. Does he agree that such investments put patients first and will, ultimately, save lives?

Mrs I Robinson: Nonsense.

Mr McCallister: The Member was against any form of new money.

Mr McGimpsey: I have not consulted the Hansard report of the Committee meeting, but I am sure that what Mr McCallister said is correct.

I have a fleeting memory of talk of the Mater Hospital closing, of a hospital in Enniskillen not being built, and of Downpatrick not getting a new hospital, but I do not wish to labour those points today.

The new Downe Hospital will be completed in April 2009. Running costs are stated in the Estimates, and they have been agreed in the Budget.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to address their remarks through the Chair.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for a reply that I received from his office today regarding mental-health provision at Downe Hospital. I note from the reply that sites identified in the business plan are no longer available and that other land is being assessed in the Rathfriland area. Will the Minister provide details of services for the elderly in the new Downe Hospital? Does he envisage that the non-availability of those sites will create difficulties in the future?

Mr McGimpsey: The profile for the new Downe Hospital is 124 beds. Of those, 114 will be inpatient beds. There will also be 20 beds for care for the elderly, as well as beds for acute psychiatry, elderly psychiatry, coronary care, general medicine, an obstetric day unit and a paediatric day unit. We are also considering a proposal to locate a midwifery unit in the new Downe Hospital. That is one of the aspects where investment may be considered.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Willie Clarke to ask a supplementary.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My question has been asked.

Mr McGimpsey: I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker, I did not pick up what the Member said.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I apologise. We shall move on.

Vioxx

6. **Mrs O'Neill** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people taking the Vioxx drug, prior to its being taken off the market. (AQO 2252/08)

Mr McGimpsey: Information on patients who were prescribed Vioxx in Northern Ireland is not held. However, it is estimated that approximately 400,000 people have been prescribed the drug in the UK.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister will be aware of a successful campaign by victims of Vioxx in the US. Does he agree that people from the North who took the same drug suffered similar health effects and were subjected to the same misrepresentation? Does he agree that they should be given every support to challenge that multinational company? Surely, that company has a moral responsibility, never mind a legal responsibility, to compensate victims.

Furthermore, does the Minister agree that if a company is regulated to supply drugs to people in the North, they should be accountable to the Health Service?

Mr McGimpsey: I fully support the principle of compensation for any patient who has suffered ill health as a result of using medicines. Merck, which is the manufacturer of Vioxx, voluntarily withdrew the drug and set aside a large sum of money for compensation. That compensation is only for citizens of the US. That was challenged in the US courts and confirmed by a US judge.

I will monitor the situation in respect of UK citizens obtaining compensation. Legal action is under way; therefore, it is not appropriate for me or the Department to comment on the case, as it is likely to end up in litigation. However, I fully support the principle of compensation for patients who suffer as a result of taking medicines.

Mr Shannon: Will the Minister add his support for people who have suffered in Northern Ireland and in the United Kingdom? If money has been set aside for compensation in the USA, would it not be appropriate to set aside the same compensation for people in the United Kingdom and in Northern Ireland? Will he add his support for those patients who are seeking compensation?

Mr McGimpsey: I do not have much to add to what I said to Mrs O'Neill. I support the principle of compensation. I assume that those people will work towards litigation and the case will end up in court, so it is not appropriate for me to comment in detail on it at this point.

Mr Gallagher: This raises another issue regarding the regulation of drugs coming on to the market. Given that Vioxx was on the market for about five years before it was withdrawn — in a period that pre-dated the Assembly and the Minister's appointment to his office — can he assure the House that such policies will be reviewed so that we do not repeat mistakes?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up for questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I am sure that the Minister will respond to Mr Gallagher in writing.

3.00pm

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Directional Signage

1. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he intends to conduct a review of the criteria for providing directional signage to facilities, in particular to those operated by sporting organisations in rural communities. (AQO 2216/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Roads Service has clear policies on directional and tourist signage. Both policies were introduced in 2004, and the latter was developed and agreed by the Tourist Board. Unless designated by the Tourist Board as a tourist attraction, facilities — including public sports facilities — are not eligible for white-on-brown tourist signing. However, in certain cases where there is a clear road-safety reason for doing so, or where the facilities are hard to find and generate a significant volume of traffic from outside the locality, normal directional signing is provided.

The objective of the signing policy is to reduce sign clutter and guide drivers to their desired destination via the most appropriate route during the latter stages of their journey. The signing is intended to complement — not replace — the pre-planning of the journey and the use of maps, road atlases and verbal instructions. I have no plans to review those policies.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As the Minister is aware, I wrote to him recently on the matter of providing directional signage to churches, chapels and sporting grounds, such as Healy Park in Omagh. Also, has the Minister plans to erect bilingual signs?

Mr Murphy: Under the policy, directional signage is not, usually, permitted to facilities that are located on urban distributor roads or rural A- or B-class roads, because it is assumed that such premises can be found easily by following directional signage to the adjacent town or village. Healy Park in Omagh is a case in point; it is located on a B-class urban distributor road, and drivers can locate the facility easily by following signs for Gortin. I have followed them myself on many occasions — although I have been less successful in getting out of the ground.

There is a legislative question about the power to promote Irish or Ulster Scots on traffic signs. Roads Service is working on a draft policy, with associated legislative change, to permit those languages, in addition to English, on a limited number of traffic signs. That policy does not extend to directional signage generally.

Mr McCausland: Reference has been made to signage that leads to churches. Present policy dictates that signage to a church will be provided only if the church has got a seating capacity over a certain figure. Many smaller evangelical churches and mission halls across Northern Ireland fall below that figure and are, therefore, excluded. Will the Minister undertake to review that figure to make some provision for the churches and mission halls that fall into that category?

Mr Murphy: As I said, under the current policy, facilities that are located on urban distributor roads or rural A- or B-class roads are considered to be easily

found, if one follows directions to the nearest town or village. I will be happy to look at whether such small churches that are located on C-class roads well off the beaten track have a case for signage; I know that there are some in my own constituency. There are no plans to review the policy, but there should be scope to consider, case by case, signage for small facilities that are off the beaten track.

Mr Gallagher: There are serious signage issues in urban and rural areas. The Department refuses to erect signs on busy streets in towns warning that there are children at play; likewise, it refuses to erect signage or put down road markings on dangerous rural roads on which there are sharp bends and blind corners.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member ask his question, please?

Mr Gallagher: The Minister has said that he has no plan to review the policy, but, in view of the dangers that still exist, will he reconsider that view and allow another review to take place?

Mr Murphy: Road safety is a priority. However, demands in urban and rural areas for traffic-calming measures — whether signage, surface alterations or traffic humps — far outstrip the Department's resources and therefore, unfortunately, such considerations must continue to be based on priority. Nevertheless, compelling cases on grounds of road safety will be treated seriously.

Rivers Agency and Bad Weather Conditions

2. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he has given to implementing a plan with the Rivers Agency to respond to bad weather conditions and to assist road users and pedestrians. (AQO 2155/08)

Mr Murphy: Roads Service has arrangements in place with the Rivers Agency to deal with local flooding. Responsibility for the drainage infrastructure is shared by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Department for Regional Development (DRD) through the Rivers Agency, the Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water.

DARD's Rivers Agency has taken the lead in formulating liaison procedures between the three drainage organisations and in co-ordinating the emergency response to localised flooding. That has resulted in best-practice guidelines and a flooding hotspot register. The best-practice guidelines explain how the three drainage agencies will manage local flooding events, and they include a protocol for the formation of a flood team — made up of representatives from the Rivers Agency, Northern Ireland Water and the Roads Service — which will provide co-ordination and liaison with the public and the media.

In addition, the Roads Service will work alongside other responding organisations, such as local councils, the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and NIE (Northern Ireland Electricity) to minimise property damage and disruption.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. I will be interested to see those arrangements in action. In response to an earlier written question, the Minister said that Foyle was the Province's flooding hotspot, followed by Fermanagh and South Tyrone and that in the area that I represent, Strangford, there were 91 emergency call-outs over Christmas and the new year.

Given that the Minister said that there would be a flooding hotspot register, what plans are in place for the Rivers Agency and DRD to agree where flooding will occur in the Strangford area? I am not a prophet nor the son of a prophet; however, the next time it rains in Strangford, I can tell the Minister where flooding will occur, and if I know, DRD and the Rivers Agency should know. Is there a plan of action for Strangford?

Mr Murphy: There is a flooding hotspots register, which includes key locations throughout the North that have been identified by NI Water, the Rivers Agency and the Roads Service; it also lists the nominated lead agency for dealing with each location. The criteria for a location's inclusion on the hotspot register are that there must be a history of flooding and more than one agency must have been involved. Problems are not always easily resolved; they are sometimes expensive, relatively serious and solutions may not be immediately obvious and may require inter-agency liaison.

If the Met Office issues a heavy rain warning, preparations include the advance removal of debris from drainage outlets and culverts in flooding hotspots by the relevant agency. The flooding hotspot register will be updated as new locations are identified and problem locations are dealt with.

Recently, weather patterns have produced severe and more prolonged periods of heavy rain than in previous decades. That puts stress on the agencies that are expected to deal with hotspots; however, wherever hotspots are identified, the agencies are expected to deal with them, and if there are breakdowns, we aim to improve future arrangements.

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister ensure that a permanent, full-time, multi-agency approach is initiated to anticipate bad weather alerts?

Mr Murphy: We have a permanent multi-agency approach. Following the flooding in east Belfast last summer, the Executive examined the emergency response, and a single phone number was set up to deal with such matters and to sharpen the response.

Met Office reports can be quite vague, so it is difficult to provide a targeted response. For instance, at

the time of the Belfast floods, weather reports referred only to heavy rainfall over the east of the Six Counties, and that did not enable teams to be on the ground in the specific east Belfast streets that suffered. It is not possible to get an accurate enough forecast to enable people to go to specific sites. However, when heavy rain is forecast the agencies are expected to respond according to the flooding hotspot register to ensure that culverts and gullies are cleared and that preventative action is taken where possible.

Certainly, there is always room for improvement in the response of all the agencies concerned. The Executive examined the emergency response and how to sharpen co-ordination between the agencies that deal with those issues.

Mrs Hanna: I apologise that my question is in the same vein. Will the Minister ensure that there is a seamless relationship between all the bodies he has mentioned, so that the emergency and statutory services can ascertain where their responsibilities lie — in other words, to determine where the buck stops? I think particularly of my constituents in South Belfast, in areas such as Stranmillis and Four Winds, who are tortured by flooded gardens all year round.

Mr Murphy: As I have said, protocols and best practice guidelines have been established to ensure that emergency responses are properly co-ordinated between agencies. Undoubtedly, when major — or even minor — incidents occur, we always find areas in which improvements can be made and communication can be enhanced.

Following last summer's flooding, in which a wide range of agencies were involved, such as Belfast City Council, the Fire and Rescue Service and the PSNI, the Executive examined the issue of the overall emergency response and how to improve it. Best practice protocols exist, and the agencies concerned follow them, but there is always room for improvement. Every incident points up somewhere that the arrangements can be tightened. I appreciate the Member's comments; people do get frustrated when they try to contact the agencies responsible, and we must continue to work on improving that response.

A1: Future Upgrades

3. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his Department's plans to upgrade the A1 in the near future. (AQO 2163/08)

Mr Murphy: The regional strategic transport network transport plan 2015 identified the A1 from Sprucefield to the border as a key strategic route. The Department's Roads Service plans for upgrading the A1 are as outlined in the transport plan, which was published in March 2005, and in the consultation document published in

2006, which outlined proposals for expanding the strategic road improvement programme.

The schemes already completed, or ongoing for improvement, on the A1 include the flyover at Rathfriland Road, Banbridge, which was opened in March 2004; the dual carriageway from Loughbrickland to Beech Hill, which was opened in 2006; the underpass at Hillsborough Road, Dromore, which was opened in June 2005; the cross-border dual carriageway link between Newry and Dundalk, which was opened in August 2007; and the dual carriageway from Beech Hill to Cloghogue, which is being constructed as part of package 2, as are four junctions, comprising a flyover at Dromore Road, Hillsborough, an underpass at Banbridge Road, Dromore, a flyover at Dromore Road, Banbridge and an underpass at Dublin Road, Loughbrickland.

Work on the assessment of an expanded strategic road improvement programme is at an advanced stage, following the endorsement by the Assembly of the investment strategy 2008-2018. Among the schemes under consideration are proposals for further improvements on the A1: namely, the M1/A1 Sprucefield bypass; additional A1 junctions; and four additional flyover junctions at Listully Curran Road, Gowdystown Road, Skeltons Road and Waringsford Road. Those proposals also include provision of a crash barrier along the entire central reservation on the A1 between Sprucefield and Loughbrickland, thus removing all at-grade road crossings.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. Bearing in mind the number of fatal accidents that occurred on the A1 last year, will he undertake to improve road widening along the full length of the road, which would make it motorway standard and would significantly improve safety on the dual carriageway?

Mr Murphy: I apologise for giving such a long answer, but as I said, road safety has been progressively improved in all the plans that I mentioned in detail. The Member will be aware that the junctions at Dromore and Banbridge have been made safer by flyovers or underpasses. In the long term, it is intended that there should be an unbroken central reservation along the full length of the road from Sprucefield to the border. That will greatly enhance road safety, and we are conscious of that at every step. Four junctions have been made safer as part of the current improvements, and there are plans for further improvements to remove all crossover junctions, which will enhance safety for the travelling public.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister give the House an update on the proposals for a bypass to the M1/A1 Sprucefield junction, which he touched on in his previous answer?

3.15 pm

Mr Murphy: The draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) contains a proposal for a new road link between the M1 and the A1. That is a longer-term proposal and it will be progressed outside the period of the plan. However, Roads Service is seeking protection for the proposed new routes through BMAP until the proposals for Sprucefield and the Maze can be assessed in detail. If progressed, the highway proposals will be subject to the normal statutory procedures and full consultation. That will include an option appraisal, economic evaluation and environmental assessment. The public will have a formal opportunity to comment on any aspect of the scheme. A local public inquiry may also be held if objections raised to the proposals cannot be resolved.

Mr P J Bradley: Many residents in the constituencies of South Down and Newry and Armagh have expressed concerns about the cessation of work on the scheme. On a previous occasion, I asked the Minister about that, and I thank him for his prompt reply. However, will he confirm that the work had to cease for no other reason than because of the archaeological findings?

Mr Murphy: First, the work did not cease; it has continued. There was some suggestion that contractors had walked off site. However, I confirm that the contractors who were appointed by the Department have been on-site throughout: the work has not ceased. As the Member and I know well, anticipation of discovery of some areas of archaeological interest is built into any contract, particularly those that cut across the countryside. Those matters are being dealt with, and, according to the information that I have received, they will not prolong the contract.

As far as we are concerned, the contract is still on schedule. Thus, the archaeological work is the only reason that I have been given for any delay to the original schedule of work, and, in many ways, that delay was anticipated. I have received no information about any other problems on that site.

Ratio of Spending on Roads Versus Public Transport

4. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the ratio of spending on roads versus public transport, during the period covered by the investment strategy for Northern Ireland.

(AQO 2160/08)

Mr Murphy: Over the 10 years of the investment strategy — to 2017-18 — the ratio of the indicative capital allocation for roads versus public transport averages at 81% for road against 19% for public transport.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he specifically outline what he means by Belfast rapid transit and which areas of greater Belfast will benefit from that?

Mr Murphy: Two further questions have been tabled about that matter, so I will delve into my responses to those now. When I came to the Department, it had already appointed the consultants WS Atkins PLC to carry out a study of two particular routes in the east of the City; one involving the E-way route and one into Titanic Quarter.

I asked for the study to be extended to explore options for routes in west and south Belfast. We have recently received quite a detailed study, which we are currently analysing. Last week, some members of the Regional Development Committee and I had an opportunity to look at rapid-transport provision in different cities in Holland to consider the most appropriate and effective system for Belfast.

Ultimately, we want to create an appropriate and effective system that encourages more people out of their cars and into public transport and that provides reliable, safe and fast public transport. That is obviously evident in the very term “rapid-transit system”. We want a system that will get people quickly across the city and from the outer areas of the city to the inner-city, as the case may be. It is early days for the propositions, but in the Programme for Government, which the Executive agreed and the Assembly endorsed, we have committed ourselves to be working on the scheme by 2011.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline the steps he has taken to ensure that public transport continues to be adequately funded?

Mr Murphy: I am committed to continuing to invest in public transport. The Department submitted bids in ISNI II (Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland II) for a variety of road and public transport schemes, including bids to upgrade the rail network and for the development of a rapid-transit system in Belfast, as I have just mentioned. Those bids total £5,185 million for roads and £1,602 million for public transport at 2007-08 prices.

The roads network has been allocated £612 million capital, against £195 million for public transport, for the 2007-11 Budget period, which equates to 76% for roads against 24% for public transport.

During a debate on this issue a couple of weeks ago, I made the point that buses — which use the roads — make up the vast majority of public transport. Therefore, investment in roads does not necessarily come at the expense of public transport; in many ways it contributes to public transport.

Mrs M Bradley: Heavy traffic is constant on Main Street in Dungiven, and there is evidence that pollution levels are well above what is deemed to be safe. Will the Minister indicate how he intends to fast-track and prioritise projects such as a bypass for Dungiven?

Mr Murphy: I am aware of the issues in and around Dungiven. Although we desire to move with all speed, there are statutory processes that have to be gone through with any major road project. People have to have the chance to see what is being proposed, and to raise objections if they feel that their rights are being impinged on. It would be unfair and unwise to try to deprive people of the right to have their say on any major roads projects.

The ability to fast-track projects is restricted. No one would advocate steamrolling the process of identifying and appointing contractors, the designing of the projects, or indeed, dealing with public enquiries, concerns and objections. Furthermore, in major road-building processes, it is important to do what is right by the public purse.

Having said that, I know that there is a strong desire in the north-west to get a bypass completed as quickly as possible. I will try to ensure that there is no delay. Nonetheless, as I said, processes have to be followed or we will find ourselves in court facing a judicial review, which would, in turn, delay the process.

A2 Carrickfergus to Belfast Road

5. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Regional Development to give a timescale within which the findings of the public inquiry into the improvements to the A2 Carrickfergus to Belfast Road will be published. (AQO 2202/08)

Mr Murphy: In many ways the answer to that question relates to the type of process that I have described just now. The Roads Service held a public inquiry into its proposals for a major works scheme on the A2 Shore Road at Greenisland in October 2007. The inspector's report on the inquiry — which was forwarded to Roads Service on 22 January 2008 — is currently being considered with a view to producing a departmental statement on proposals for progressing the scheme. It is presently anticipated that a statement will be published in the autumn.

Mr Neeson: As the Minister knows, major disruption will be caused when work is being carried out on that road. Can he give an assurance that he will improve public-transport services in that area, particularly the park-and-ride scheme at Carrickfergus train station? That could be done by relocating the Roads Service depot, which is in the council yard.

Will the Minister also give an assurance that he will replace the clapped-out, Third World trains that currently service the Larne line?

Mr Murphy: We want to advance that scheme as quickly as possible. However, as with any road scheme, we anticipate that there will be disruption during the construction period. As I outlined earlier, there has been substantial investment in public transport.

The route that the Member referred to, coming into east Antrim from the Carrickfergus side, is a busy one. My Department will be considering a range of measures, including improvements to the rolling stock that he mentioned. We have given a commitment to get the new carriages operating as quickly as possible. I have spoken to representatives of Larne Borough Council and several Members from East Antrim about that issue.

Other facilities that my Department is considering include improved access at train stations, park-and-ride facilities and increased parking. There are a range of measures that contribute towards improving public transport.

Ultimately, although we can improve the roads network, congestion will continue to be a problem in the foreseeable future. Therefore, other ways of investing need to be found in order to encourage more people to leave their cars at home and use public transport. However, people will use public transport only if it is fast, efficient, effective and comfortable. That is what my Department wants to achieve through investing in public transport.

Mr Beggs: Further to Mr Neeson's question, there have been considerable difficulties even in resurfacing the A2 because of the lack of viable alternatives to that route. Will the Minister ensure careful consideration and close consultation with the public and key groups so that traffic disruption can be minimised and the optimum plan developed? Will he also ensure that park-and-ride facilities at various locations along the east Antrim line will be increased; and that there will be an increase in rolling stock so that train capacity expands and traffic congestion is minimised?

Mr Murphy: I am acutely aware of the depth of feeling in east Antrim about the current level of rolling stock. My Department will move as quickly as possible to find a resolution. I have, on many occasions, explained to Mr Beggs, to other Members, and to the local district council, the problems that we face in trying to improve the situation. As is the case with any major roads project, there will be traffic disruption.

Roads Service is considering projects at various junctions along the Shore Road, the Old Shore Road in Whiteabbey village, and the Glenville Road. It is anticipated that that road works will displace traffic-causing problems in that area.

I will certainly raise the Member's concerns with the local Roads Service division. It is good practice to engage with local representatives and communities so that those people are given the opportunity to air their views. Useful solutions can often be gleaned from dialogue with local people, so I assure Mr Beggs that his comments will be passed on to whoever is managing that project.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister assure the House that the full findings of the public inquiry will be made available to everyone?

Mr Murphy: The inspector's report and the findings of the public inquiry will be made available to the public after the publication of the departmental statement, which I anticipate will happen in the autumn.

Hightown Bridge

6. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps that he is taking to alleviate the difficulties of people living and working in the Hightown and Mallusk areas of Newtownabbey, as a result of the closure of the Hightown Bridge.
(AQO 2204/08)

Mr Murphy: The 50-year-old Hightown Bridge over the M2 has been assessed by my Roads Service and deemed to be in need of replacement. If the bridge is not replaced, it will deteriorate further, eventually becoming unsafe.

After Roads Service's detailed assessment of a range of temporary traffic options, I announced on 7 January 2008 my decision to close the Hightown Bridge, and allow for its demolition and reconstruction. At that time, I also announced a package of measures aimed at alleviating the disruption during the closure to people living and working in the Hightown and Mallusk areas of Newtownabbey.

Those measures include the offer of an Ambulance Service vehicle base at Glengormley; the maintenance of pedestrian access across the bridge during reconstruction; the provision of traffic signals at the Sandyknowes junction of Scullion's Road; the provision of traffic-monitoring cameras on Scullion's Road; the provision of an additional bus lane for Hightown and Mayfield, funded by Roads Service; the provision of an emergency-breakdown vehicle-recovery service for the Sandyknowes roundabout; the ongoing management of traffic-signal times on the diversion route in order to minimise traffic congestion and delays; and ongoing liaison with the emergency services about access arrangements to Hightown and Mayfield. There are other measures, but I am conscious that the Member will want to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Ford: I am grateful to the Minister for not repeating a list of the measures that we already know about. However, in a letter that he wrote to me, dated 31 January 2008, the Minister admitted that the economic appraisal that was carried out in 2004 took no account of the greatly increasing population in Upper Hightown, or the increasing employment in the Mallusk Industrial Estate. Is that not unacceptable, and has it not led to huge problems for people in that area? Could I also ask the Minister what assessment of traffic flows — or, rather, the lack thereof — he has made since his decision to close the bridge for the second time?

Mr Murphy: Mr Ford and various other Members have repeatedly been in touch with the Department about these matters. I had two opportunities, before and after Christmas, to meet with a representative delegation from Hightown, and I am very aware of the disruption caused by the closure of the bridge. However, I have held many meetings with Roads Service on this issue, and I know that every viable alternative option was considered. Eventually, it was agreed that closing the bridge and getting a replacement constructed as soon as possible was the only solution. That is what the Department intends to do.

I am conscious of the disruption that that has caused in the area, and I intend to continue to monitor its impact. It is not much comfort to those who have been caught up in traffic, but the early assessment is that the arrangements are managing, and the problem is no worse than was anticipated. We have given a commitment to listen to any further suggestions, and to implement any possible improvements as the work goes on. We will hold to that.

3.30 pm

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Social Deprivation

1. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the steps that she is taking, in conjunction with other Executive Ministers, to tackle social deprivation.
(AQO 2133/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): Tackling social deprivation is central to the work that is being progressed by my Department under the Programme for Government. Much of that work is encapsulated in the public service agreements that underpin the Programme for Government, which recognises my Department's significant role in a range of issues that are critical to the fight against poverty. My Department takes the lead in the promotion of decent, energy-efficient, affordable housing; in the

regeneration of disadvantaged areas, towns and city centres; and in supporting community development.

The bottom 10% of disadvantaged communities in respect of multiple deprivation are addressed through the Executive's — or the interdepartmental — neighbourhood renewal scheme, which is led by the Department for Social Development (DSD).

Mr McCallister: I thank the Minister for her answer. How does she square her views on tackling social deprivation, fuel poverty and child poverty, with the fact that some factors are outside her control? Examples are fuel prices and the imposition of water charges, which will hit the poorest families hardest.

Ms Ritchie: I recognise Mr McCallister's points. We have very little control over certain costs, whether we are Ministers, MLAs or members of the public. Such indices as fuel costs are independent of levels of income. When additional costs come from Government, such as rent, rates and water charges, we tailor them to have a minimal adverse impact on those who are most disadvantaged. Such measures include housing benefit and exemption from rates and, in due course, will probably include an affordability tariff for water.

Mr Bresland: Will the Minister outline what benefits the local community fund has brought to tackling social deprivation, and will she make a commitment to provide further funding to that fund beyond the current financial year?

Ms Ritchie: I thank Mr Bresland for his question. The local community fund is one of the issues that I am currently considering, along with neighbourhood renewal, and the funding of the voluntary and community sectors. I wish to make it absolutely clear to the Member, and to all Members, that I am compelled — and charged with the need — to tackle social and economic deprivation, as they impact on disadvantaged communities throughout Northern Ireland. As Members of this House, all of us must be committed to address the needs of those who are most deprived.

Mr O'Loan: If neighbourhood renewal is to become a successful example of joined-up government, how important is it that other Departments are prepared to support and fund their particular elements of neighbourhood renewal action plans?

Ms Ritchie: All parts of Government are committed to tackling disadvantage and deprivation in neighbourhood renewal areas through effective use of their available mainstream budgets against agreed priorities and needs. Over the past several months, I have tried to secure the effective buy-in of every Minister and every Department to address disadvantage and deprivation.

All Departments and statutory agencies are currently working to agree a collective response to local needs,

as identified in neighbourhood action plans, and there are 36 neighbourhood renewal areas in Northern Ireland.

Competing demands, and a need for greater co-ordination in service planning and delivery, have meant that the process has proven difficult. Neighbourhood renewal can be effective only if we target our limited resources more effectively, with all branches of Government playing their full part. For example, I was pleased to learn that all parties will be participating in a focused neighbourhood renewal health workshop, which is due to take place later this week. That exemplifies the level of partnership working that is needed to tackle the complex issues around poor health levels that people who live in disadvantaged communities experience. I welcome that level of commitment and support from colleagues in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Two weeks ago, I visited the West Belfast Partnership, which demonstrated to me that there must be buy-in from all Departments if the basic purpose of neighbourhood renewal — namely, to tackle disadvantage — is to be addressed properly.

Travellers' Site: Legahory, Craigavon

2. **Mr Simpson** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the current status of the Travellers' site at Legahory in Craigavon. (AQO 2127/08)

Ms Ritchie: The Travellers' site at Legahory in Craigavon is an emergency halting site. I fully appreciate the concerns that the Member raised with Mr Moutray and me only this morning, and that Mrs Dolores Kelly subsequently raised in a telephone conversation that I had with her about the site. I understand what they have told me, and I will be meeting the Housing Executive shortly to discuss the issue. I will also be visiting Craigavon next week, where I will speak both to the Travellers and to residents, in order to deal with the particular issues and problems that pertain to that area.

For the benefit of Members, I should explain that Legahory is a temporary place to park, with basic facilities. The development of the emergency site is being progressed as an interim solution, until a suitable location can be acquired for the construction of a permanent transit site. Once such a location is found, the emergency halting site at Legahory will close.

Mr Simpson: I thank the Minister for her answer, but will she assure the community that that site will not become permanent and that the current status that it holds will not be renewed at the end of its duration? Furthermore, will she commit to a review of the legislation in order to bring about a fairer spread of sites throughout Northern Ireland, and not just throughout

Craigavon, or throughout six council areas, as is currently the case?

Ms Ritchie: I fully take on board what Mr Simpson has said, having been made aware of his concerns at our meeting this morning. However, we must be careful to balance the requirements and needs of those who live in the settled community with those who belong to the Travelling community.

To get to the meat of the Member's question, the status of the site is precisely the reason why I will meet the Housing Executive shortly, in advance of my visit to Craigavon and Legahory. In my discussions with the Travellers and residents, I shall ascertain the nature of the problem at first hand and see what can be done to resolve it. Not only have Mr Simpson and Mr Moutray informed me about the matter, but my colleague Mrs Dolores Kelly has outlined the problems that are faced there.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The status of the Travellers' site at Legahory is a disgrace — that is its status. I met the Housing Executive several months ago to discuss that site, and its status is not the fault of the Travelling community but the fault of the Housing Executive and the Department for Social Development. Some £25,000 of public money has been wasted on the site, and I ask the Minister whether she will conduct an urgent review of the Housing Executive's policy booklet on the development of emergency sites, because it meets neither the needs of Travellers nor settled communities.

Ms Ritchie: I have heard what the Member has to say. Unfortunately, he has not raised this particular issue with me in the past —

Mr O'Dowd: On several occasions —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members to make their remarks through the Chair.

Ms Ritchie: We have to be very careful in how we deal with these issues. As I said earlier, we are dealing not with competitive needs, but with the very special needs of a settled community and the very special needs of Travellers. Those are particularly sensitive issues, and I want to ensure that the best possible solution is achieved for the people of Craigavon. It would be best if the Member directed his requests in writing to the Minister, rather than using the Chamber as a means of getting at the Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There has been good order up to now; let us continue in that way.

Mr Gardiner: The Minister will be aware that Craigavon is known as the Northern Ireland headquarters for Travellers' sites. She will also know that the Housing Executive is proposing an additional site or sites. Is she conscious of those other local authorities

that are not providing any Travellers' sites, and what does she intend to do about it?

Ms Ritchie: There are 11 sites in Northern Ireland — six service sites, two transit sites and three emergency halting sites — and they are found in 10 district council areas. An accommodation-needs assessment is being carried out to find out which are the best possible sites for Travellers. Always remember — Travellers identify where they want to live. Their preferred locations are usually based on historical reasons; for example, their family may have been in a particular place for several years. I can go only on the information and the evidential research that is available to me.

The results of the accommodation assessment are due in May, and decisions will be made on the basis of that.

Integrated Housing Schemes

3. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline her plans for developing further integrated housing schemes. (AQO 2195/08)

Ms Ritchie: I have visited the first shared housing scheme, which is at Carran Crescent in Enniskillen, and I found it to be very well settled. That was back in December 2007. I am encouraged to see that good progress is being made in the consideration of potential schemes at Sion Mills, Loughbrickland, Ballygowan, Banbridge and Magherafelt. Other sites are at an early stage of consideration in Rasharkin, Ballycastle, Derry and Randalstown. Of course, those are all newbuild schemes.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her response as far as newbuild schemes are concerned. However, does she not agree that it is also vital for her Department and the Housing Executive to take action to support people in areas where the community is already integrated and wishes to remain so? Does she have any specific proposals to support people in estates such as Springfarm in Antrim? Unlike my colleague Kieran McCarthy, I will not name every estate in my constituency.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is very generous of you.

Ms Ritchie: Like Mr Ford, I am concerned about the level of segregation, particularly in the social-housing sector. I am anxious that we move away from that level of segregation to a position of greater integration. With the bedding down of political institutions and the greater level of peace and harmony in our community, it is possible to achieve that. We have an integrated sector in health, and we see a preference for integration in education. There is a compelling logic behind greater integration in the housing sector, and I will address that issue in my statement on housing tomorrow.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. All Members share a concern about the lack of social, affordable and, possibly other, housing

schemes in their constituencies. Why did the Minister not instruct her Department to carry out a full equality impact assessment on the Girdwood site in north Belfast, which will have some form of affordable and social housing built on it?

3.45 pm

Ms Ritchie: I am very much charged with the need to address the social housing inequalities in north Belfast. If I may explain some of the background: when I launched the 'Crumlin Road Gaol & Girdwood Army Barracks Draft Masterplan' for public consultation on 16 October, 2007, and when I launched the environmental improvement scheme for Crumlin Road jail on 17 September, 2007, I indicated that my preference was for shared, equal housing on the Girdwood site in order to address those inherent, historical inequalities in housing which have been prevalent for many, many years. We cannot get away from that.

I note what the Member said about the equality impact statement. Whenever I bring forward my proposals, they will be put out at that stage for an equality impact assessment.

Mr K Robinson: I have listened carefully to the Minister's last two answers. However, will she assure the Assembly that her priority will remain the actual provision of social housing and that that consideration will take priority over the imposition of integration as a precursor to any scheme, lest we create a situation similar to that which is developing around the proposals for the national stadium at the Maze Prison?

Ms Ritchie: I want to assure Mr Robinson and Members that my first priority is the provision of social and affordable housing — and, within that context, the need to increase the supply of social and affordable housing to address the clearly identified need, namely the 38,000 people on the waiting list, people who are homeless, and those with significant savings and who have so far been unable to get on the first rung of the property ladder. I will be addressing those issues in more detail in my statement tomorrow. With the bedding down of the political institutions, however, there is now a need to move ahead and try to live together as part of housing schemes.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Unrestricted Development of Houses in Multiple Occupation

4. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the assessment that she has made of the effect of her proposals for unrestricted development of houses in multiple occupation, on the resident communities in Andersonstown Road, Falls Road and Springfield Road. (AQO 2226/08)

Ms Ritchie: Although my Department is responsible for the legislation relating to houses in multiple occupation, the 'Houses in Multiple Occupancy: Subject Plan for Belfast City Council Area 2015: Draft Plan 2006', which sets out the restrictions, or lack of restrictions, is the responsibility of the Minister of the Environment. As Mr McCann is a Member of the Committee for Social Development, I am sure that he will appreciate that distinction.

The development of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) on the roads specified in the question will help to regenerate the area and help to meet local needs for shared and affordable accommodation. The 10% restriction on all other streets will protect traditional residential areas.

Mr F McCann: Initially, the proposals were being championed by the Minister's predecessor under direct rule. However, the Minister was in west Belfast a few weeks ago and would have seen at first hand the severe social deprivation in the area. Not one community organisation, including the West Belfast Partnership Board, supports the introduction of HMOs in the area. Will the Minister say why she intends to pursue the policy when there is no support in the area for such developments, which could lead to the demise of close-knit communities as we have witnessed in other parts of Belfast.

Ms Ritchie: Let me give some background information about the particular issue in west Belfast. The subject plan limits the number of houses in multiple occupation to 10% in any street in west Belfast. Obviously, the only exception will be small stretches along the frontages of the lower Springfield Road, the Falls Road and the Andersonstown Road.

In relation to west Belfast, there has been a lack of accurate, in-depth information on houses in multiple occupation. The Planning Service and the Housing Executive are working together to improve the situation. I do take on board what residents have told me. They have spoken to me about issues such as antisocial behaviour and other matters. My principal concern is to ensure that housing need across Northern Ireland, whether in disadvantaged areas or not, is properly and adequately addressed and that we serve the best interests of the community.

However, the issues that Mr McCann raised relate more to planning.

Ms Lo: Given that south Belfast already has a large number of homes of multiple occupancy, does the Minister agree that her proposals would have a further negative impact on the resident communities there?

Ms Ritchie: I thank Ms Lo for her question. Recently, I met residents of south Belfast and the chairperson and deputy chairperson of the Belfast Holylands Regeneration Association, which has a particular

interest in housing. A multidisciplinary approach is required to tackle housing problems, and other Departments and agencies must contribute to tackling related issues, such as policing and community safety.

I am concerned with addressing the need for housing in the best interests of the community and to ensure that the interests of the settled, resident community, as well as those of any incoming population, are taken on board. Everyone should try to live in peace and harmony with one another.

Mr Attwood: I acknowledge that the Minister visited west Belfast in the past couple of weeks. She walked the roads and witnessed the issues relating to neighbourhood renewal and houses in multiple occupancy around Andersonstown barracks. However, the Minister led the successful negotiations that led to an increase in her budget for the provision of social and affordable housing. Compared with the original proposals, what impact will that increase have?

Ms Ritchie: As well as the £70 million secured for this financial year, additional funding of £70 million, £75 million and £60 million has been made available to the social housing development programme to support the delivery of 1,500, 1,750 and 2,000 new units across the three-year period of the Budget.

Although I attracted criticism for being difficult at the time of the Budget, people on waiting lists, the homeless and those who want to get on to, and stay on, the housing ladder will most appreciate the value of negotiating for greater resources. My officials and I are reviewing the implications of the increased Budget allocation for priorities in the housing programme, and I will make a statement on that subject tomorrow.

I particularly appreciated my visit to the West Belfast Partnership Board and An Cultúrlann. I also enjoyed the guided tour of the Andersonstown Road, Glen Road and Falls Road. At the behest of Mr Attwood, I took a close look at some of the houses in multiple occupation. I also had an opportunity to meet local residents and hear their concerns about community safety, planning and wider issues of social development.

Unclaimed Pension Credit

5. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of the current level of unclaimed pension credit benefit, to detail her plans to ensure that as many people as possible who are entitled to this benefit, receive it. (AQO 2235/08)

Ms Ritchie: I am committed to ensuring that everyone in Northern Ireland receives the benefits to which they are entitled. I assure Mr Brady that there is good news about pension credits. When pension credit was introduced in October 2003 to replace the minimum

income guarantee, 78,000 households received the benefit. Since 2003, the number of households that receive pension credit has increased by more than 17,000 to 95,000, and almost 117,000 individuals now benefit from pension credit. The most recent figures available from the Northern Ireland income-related survey for 2004-06 show that 83% of those who are eligible receive pension credit.

Mr Brady will undoubtedly agree that that is a notable increase from 2003-05, when only 67% of eligible people claimed pension credit, and provides further evidence of increasing levels of successful benefit uptake.

Although those figures are encouraging, I am not complacent. In May 2007, I launched the Social Security Agency's 2007-08 benefit uptake programme, the aim of which is to ensure that over 150,000 older people receive their full benefit entitlement, including pension credit. The current programme builds on those undertaken in previous years, which generated over £7 million of additional benefits to some of society's most vulnerable people. I will soon launch a further uptake programme for the next financial year.

Mr Brady: Will the Minister explain how she can continue to deliver on pension credit — or, indeed, any issue — if she does not have the support of her own party, as witnessed by its refusal to support her on the Budget and the Programme for Government?

Ms Ritchie: Mr Brady must be unaware of the fact that the Treasury in London deals with benefits, and payments come directly to me through annually managed expenditure. Benefits are neither part of the comprehensive spending review nor the Budget.

My party has no problem. It has always supported the need for benefit uptake, the need to address social disadvantage and deprivation, and the need to ensure that the people who are in greatest need of benefits receive them.

Mr Cobain: The problem of unclaimed benefits is growing, mainly because of the complexity of the benefits system. Does the Minister agree that that problem will not be fully resolved, and will continue to raise its head time and time again, until we have a properly maintained and funded service that supplies free advice to the relevant areas of the community?

Ms Ritchie: Mr Cobain represents the constituency of North Belfast, where he deals with people who are suffering and disadvantaged, and he sees, at the coalface, the needs of those individuals.

The Department for Social Development and the Social Security Agency have commissioned the establishment of various advice agencies to help with the benefit uptake campaign, and, as a result of 2007's Positive Steps consultation, I will soon announce news about regional hubs for advice services throughout

Northern Ireland. Therefore, I hope that Mr Cobain will be able to factor some of the responses from his constituency into the new consultation period later this year. I will take his comments on board.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her positive response, which shows that benefit uptake is increasing. Does the Minister agree that a major advantage of the present system is that pension advisers from local Social Security Agency offices have gone out into the community? Does she agree that that is one of the main reasons for such an uptake?

Does the Minister have any plans to increase and enhance the role of pension advisers to ensure that even more people take advantage of pension credit, thereby increasing current numbers?

Ms Ritchie: I agree with the Member for Strangford Mr Shannon that the pension advisers have done an excellent job. Not only have they assisted people with pension advice but they have been able to direct people to other areas for advice — namely, social services, social workers and the Housing Executive. In many instances, those advisers have been the only point of contact in any one week for pensioners who live in isolated rural communities.

The Social Security Agency held a review of its outreach service for older people in 2007. Although the report recommended 15 staff, based on the workload information, the agency increased that to 20 pension advisers to ensure the continued successful delivery of outreach services. I assure the Member that I will seek a working report from my officials on how effective that has been in recent months, because the most important thing is that we target our money where it is most required.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes Question Time.

4.00 pm

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it appropriate for a Minister to say that he or she will not answer a Member's question during Question Time because it is not the appropriate place? Surely the clue is in the title — Question Time.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Ministers can answer as they choose.

Mr Adams: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister for Social Development did not get beyond question 5. Is that a record?

Some Members: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Adams, do you see what you have done? I doubt that that is a point of order. The Speaker has been concerned about the number of questions being answered at Question Time, and five is certainly not a record. We will now resume —

Mr O'Dowd: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Does it not devalue Question Time when a Minister refuses to answer a Member's question because this is not the appropriate venue? I accept that a Minister can answer a question as he or she chooses, but surely it is wrong for a Minister to tell a Member that he or she will not answer a question because it is not the appropriate time.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has made his point. The Speaker will issue a statement. Perhaps that issue could be raised with the Business Committee.

Mr Attwood: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will you check the Hansard report to see whether the Minister said what Mr O'Dowd said she did? In my view, he is in error and has misrepresented the Minister. Is it not highly appropriate that when a Minister answers a question on areas that are outside her statutory responsibility, she states on record that those areas are outside her statutory responsibility? Rather than being irregular, as Mr O'Dowd said, is that behaviour not highly appropriate?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Hansard report will be examined carefully, and the Speaker will make the necessary statement.

Mr Ross: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, but we are moving on.

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

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Post-Primary Transfer

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly notes with concern the lack of clarity in the Minister of Education's proposals for post-primary transfer; and urges her to bring details of her proposals immediately before the Executive and the Assembly to ease the concerns of parents, pupils and teachers.

Which amendment was:

Leave out "the Executive and"; and at end insert

" , by sitting out the practical steps necessary to deliver reform, while (i) enhancing quality; (ii) ensuring equality of opportunity for all; (iii) protecting against a post-code lottery; (iv) addressing local needs and making best use of resources through area-based planning; and (v) delivering sustainable schools." — [Mr D Bradley.]

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Once again, I welcome the opportunity to address the Assembly on post-primary transfer. This is a welcome opportunity to further update Members on developments on this issue since my statement to the Education Committee on 31 January 2008.

As I have stated before, my focus is on building a consensus for new arrangements. By working together, I want to find the best way to meet the requirements of all our children based on a shared vision that places high-quality educational outcomes and equality for every child at its epicentre. Therefore, in December 2007, I held a series of meetings with groups that have a key role in the future of post-primary arrangements, including the Governing Bodies Association, the Association of Head Teachers in Secondary Schools, the Catholic Trustees, the controlled grammar schools, the Transferors' Representative Council, the trade unions, the chief executives of the education and library boards and the Association for Quality Education.

I sought, and have received, written responses to my vision from those groups. In January, my Department undertook a further round of meetings with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS); Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta; the Council for Integrated Education; and representatives of controlled grammar schools. A third round of meetings commenced last week, on Friday 22 February.

The aim of those meetings is to seek consensus on the new arrangements. I appreciate the request from Education Committee members, and others, for clarification on the new arrangements for the 2010 transfer procedure. I am very aware of the opinions

expressed by parents, pupils and teachers about the need to provide firm information on new transfer arrangements at the appropriate time. In that context, I will outline where we are in the process of securing those changes. From the outset, my approach has been to set the overall vision, and then to engage with those with a key role to play, in order to seek a set of proposals to which everyone can sign up and be committed.

The process that I have undertaken is the biggest reform ever of the education system here in the North of Ireland. Far from there being lack of clarity and delay, I am pleased at the progress made to date, in the necessary democratic process of consultation, to deliver such a progressive overhaul of the education system. I re-emphasise that the debate has moved on from the narrow one around academic selection. Nobody is now arguing for the retention of the 11-plus. We are engaging positively across the breadth of the education sector on the reform of the system.

Let us be honest: there are many Members, right across this House, who are opposed to change. They are afraid of change and of what it will bring. Some are merely paying lip service to the notion that they are behind progressive change. At the same time, they have joined forces with those who are most opposed to change, and are playing narrow, opportunistic party politics. That is very regrettable. Others have difficulty with a Sinn Féin Minister leading change — particularly a female Minister — and have chosen to personalise the debate, rather than positively engage on the need for reform. Just listen to the language that was used this morning. It was the language of the scared. There is no need to fear change. Change is good, and it is going to happen.

Others, still, are opposed to educational reform, and wish to retain the antiquated system that we currently have — a system designed by successive unionist and direct rule Ministers. Sinn Féin chose the Education portfolio — and I am proud that it did. We chose that portfolio because we care about the education of our children. We care about the education of — [Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Please allow the Minister to respond to the debate.

Ms Ruane: We care about the education of all our children. We are going to bring in a system in which every child gets the same chance. Other parties had the opportunity to choose the Education portfolio. They did not choose it, but Sinn Féin did.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: No; I will not give way.

Sinn Féin did, because we understand the need for change in a system that is decaying and is in free-fall. Members can shout at me, try to abuse and bully me, but that is what it is all about. They are afraid of the

much-needed change that is going to occur. We are about reforming education in a progressive way.

We were under no illusions as to the challenges of delivering the biggest reform ever in the history of the North of Ireland. We make no apology for that. I repeat that no amount of shouting, sniping, bully tactics — whether it is in this Chamber, on the sidelines, or in the media — will stop the progressive reform process that is under way and moving forward. I will not be swayed, because I am not prepared to fail our children.

Dúirt mé ariamh go bhfuil mé ag lorg creatlach láidir reachtaíochta do mo chuid tograí. Má thig linn comhaontú oideachais a bhaint amach, is é mo chéad chéim eile tacaíocht an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin, an Choiste Oideachais agus an Tionóil a fháil do na tograí. Ina dhiaidh sin, cuirfidh mé dréacht-rialacháin ar chritéir iontrála faoi chomhairliúcháin lena chinntiú go mbeidh bonn láidir reachtaíochta faoi na socruithe úra.

That translates as: fortunately, the vast majority of the discussions that we have been engaged in have been productive. I am grateful to all concerned for the constructive spirit in which they have engaged in the process.

The issues discussed include an inclusive transfer process based on shared information about the applicant, but used in such a way that the information does not become the determinant of admission; matching appropriate teaching to the needs of children; the use of admissions criteria for oversubscribed schools; introducing greater flexibility and agility into our school structures so that we can offer expanded post-14 provision and choice to young people; the nature of election at 14 years of age and the different routes through which young people's choices at that critical age can be facilitated; area-based planning and its links with the delivery of the entitlement framework and with the reorganising of the schools estate at a time of inefficiently utilised excess capacity; expanding the extent of school collaboration and the development of learning communities; and providing schools with time and assistance to adjust to new arrangements.

Again, I wish to emphasise the current state of play in our education system, with a significant proportion of children disengaging from the education system by the age of 16, and the stark statistic of more than half of our current student population leaving school without basic reading and writing skills. That amounts to 12,000 young people every year.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: No, I will not give way.

Twelve thousand young people are being failed because people are afraid of change. We need an education system that is reflective of society and capable of catering for the diverse needs of our children, whether

they choose an academic or vocational course in life — be that a bricklayer, a tiler or an engineer, a childcare worker or a teacher, an electrician or a scientist, a carpenter or an accountant. We are capable of delivering that flexibility and choice to our education system.

We already have a broad consensus on the importance of 14 years of age as a key educational decision point. We also have broad educational consensus, supported by independent advice — the Costello and Bain Reports — on the need to deliver to young people the entitlement framework and expand educational choice from the age of 14 onwards. I understand that parents and schools want certainty, and I also understand that my pursuit of a consensus, which takes time, can be frustrating. However, let me make it clear why the pursuit of a consensus is so necessary.

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

Ms Ruane: Whatever system of transfer we finally agree on, that transfer will perform a critical —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: For the benefit of the House, will the Minister define the meaning of the word “consensus”?

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Mr McCrea knows, that is not a point of order.

Ms Ruane: I will repeat what I said, as I was interrupted.

We also have a broad consensus on the importance of age 14 as a key educational decision point. We also have broad educational consensus, supported by independent advice, on the need to deliver to young people the entitlement framework and to expand educational choice from the age of 14 onwards.

Whatever system of transfer we finally agree on, that transfer will perform a critical function. The only proposals that can be produced by such processes are proposals commanding widespread support. That is why we are investing the time in engaging the necessary democratic process of consultation with education stakeholders, time that, so far, has been well spent on building and securing consensus regarding the system of transfer that our children and schools need. Yes, it will require difficult decisions, and I will show leadership on those difficult decisions, but it will also require leadership from all concerned.

4.15 pm

A good starting point for Members would be for them not to get so agitated that they have to keep interrupting.

I will present proposals very shortly — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. What an example some Members are giving to the schoolchildren who

may be watching this debate. I know that some Members sit on schools' boards of governors, and this is an awful example to be giving to any schoolchild.

Ms Ruane: I will present proposals very shortly, given that negotiations are at an advanced stage. When I do, I want everyone to understand that those detailed proposals will be wide ranging, will have been prepared in a careful and consultative manner, and will warrant serious consideration, rather than a knee-jerk reaction.

The debate has moved on. There is no going back. We cannot continue to fail our children. We can keep academic excellence in our system, but I repeat: we cannot continue to fail all our children. It is simply not acceptable, and I will not allow it to happen. Join with me — *[Interruption.]*

Instead of rudely interrupting me, Members should join with me in transforming our education system into a dynamic educational model that reflects the world that we live in and that equips our children with the qualifications and skills that they need for the twenty-first century. I mean all our children, not just the selected few. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. There is no doubt that we have had a varied, wide-ranging and lively debate here today, with contributions from many parties, and with many points of view being shared.

Mr Butler spoke on behalf of Sinn Féin, and he chose to criticise members of the Education Committee for seeking information for which the general public is crying out. Mr Butler seems to think that there is some reference to academic selection in today's motion and amendment — I do not know where it is and cannot find it, but the Member seems to think that it is there nonetheless.

Mr Butler is a frequent absentee from the Committee's meetings, and today we saw him trying to cover up his inability to defend the indefensible on those occasions that he does attend. He tried to do that by attacking the SDLP, but his own weakness was revealed. Mr Butler's view of open and transparent Government — which Sinn Féin claims to champion — is that it should be conducted behind closed doors.

Michelle O'Neill, one of Mr Butler's colleagues, outlined the Minister's vision. However, that vision is not the issue; the matter in question is the route that will lead us to that vision and the various steps that will lead us along that route in the available time frame. Mrs O'Neill said that the debate was not very helpful, but the Minister has shown that she will provide MLAs with information only when the glare of transparency that is required on the Floor of the House prises it out of her.

As Tommy Gallagher said, Sinn Féin Members seem to confuse a call for clarity and information on important policies with an attack on the Minister. Sinn Féin's desire to defend its Minister has led to that party's becoming paranoid. That paranoia is clouding Sinn Féin's view and deafening its ears to the strong public concern that clearly exists in all areas of the community.

Several issues have emerged from today's useful debate, which was basically a plea for information, given the lack of clarity in the Minister's proposals. A number of Members echoed my point that an information gap has been allowed to open up, thus increasing the level of anxiety in the community. If Sinn Féin Members were truthful, they would admit that they are hearing the same anxiety from their supporters that every one of us is hearing from the general public — from teachers, parents, and the education providers.

Martin McGuinness declared victory, but then he went home for his tea. He has dropped Caitríona Ruane in it; and she is struggling to stay afloat.

The role of the Committee for Education has been a central theme in the debate. I am a member of that Committee, and although I do not speak on its behalf today, I can safely say that Committee members wish to engage with the Minister in an open and transparent way on the basis of all available information. The Committee cannot perform its function in the dark, although the Minister and some Sinn Féin Members would like to see the Committee work, not only in the dark, but behind closed doors.

There seems to be general prevalence for doing things behind closed doors. Some people want the Committee to work behind closed doors, and they want this issue to be referred to the Executive and dealt with behind closed doors. As I said earlier, if this issue were to be referred to the Executive, it would be in danger of becoming mired in the gridlock of Executive business, which would lead only to further frustration among parents, teachers and the education community in general.

I looked forward to hearing something new from the Minister today. Unfortunately, not for the first time, I have been disappointed. The Minister said nothing new. Today, she spoke more as a Sinn Féin Member than as a Minister, and engaged in petty, political point-scoring. She spoke of bullying tactics, but she tried to bully the Education Committee in January by filibustering for 25 minutes and walking out —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr D Bradley: — after an hour.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am going to have to bully you, Mr Bradley: your time is up. Thank you.

Mr Lunn: As Dominic Bradley said, the debate has been interesting, if predictable. However, Members have, at least, been able to express the depth of feeling

and frustration that exists throughout the Chamber on these most important issues.

I echo some of what Dominic said. He mentioned the working-behind-closed-doors approach, and I want to clarify the Committee's view on that. Three weeks ago, the Committee met the Minister, in public. At the end of the meeting, I suggested that the Committee should meet the Minister behind closed doors, so that everyone could have their say and vent their feelings without having TV cameras, microphones and reporters in the background. There would be no grandstanding, because there would be no point in doing so, and we might have a constructive debate.

As I understand it, the Committee has asked for a further meeting with the Minister. Perhaps she has already responded, but she had not done so by last Friday. We were waiting for her response, and we were, I believe, going to suggest that that meeting could be held in private. As far as I know, that was the accepted view of the Committee.

Mrs M Bradley: Does the Member agree that the Committee has never refused a meeting with the Minister?

Mr Lunn: Far from refusing a meeting, we have clamoured for meetings, at times, without success. Although it is not always desirable to meet behind closed doors; in this case, it would be useful to do so. It would not be unprecedented for a Committee to go into closed session — far from it.

Dominic Bradley also mentioned 'A Consultation on Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools', which, apparently, was concluded last Easter, but which still has not been made public. That is a good example of the sort of matter that frustrates Members. Michelle McIlveen talked about confusion turning to panic, and she mentioned consternation taking place where there is a vacuum — fair enough. She also talked about the Minister's approach of filibustering her way out of the situation in the Committee meeting a few weeks ago. It really is not on for a Minister to come to a one-hour meeting and start off by making a 25-minute statement, and, at the end, leave.

Mr K Robinson: Basically, the Minister has put much store in her discussions with stakeholders. We do not know who those stakeholders are, in the round, although some of them have been mentioned today. Does the Member think that, in her discussions with stakeholders, including, presumably, the teachers' unions, the Minister explained that there would be major job losses in education under some of her proposals, should they go through?

Mr Lunn: I will leave that question hanging in the air for someone else to answer.

A Member: Probably not.

Mr Lunn: "Probably not" will do.

Michelle McIlveen also referred to the possibility of these proposals reducing standards at the top end of our education system, when what we should be trying to do is improve the standard at the bottom end. That is a fair point.

Paul Butler made a good fist of defending his Minister, which is a thankless task at present. He expressed disappointment with my party and with the SDLP. His point was — *[Interruption.]*

It was either that, or he thought that we were being guided by DUP policy, rather than our own. However, if he reads my speech, he will see that the DUP received a couple of rebukes as well.

Basil McCrea mentioned the need for the Minister to provide leadership, and I agree with him. That is what we are looking for. It is all very well for her to say that she is waiting for the Committee's consensus proposals. She has proposals from every relevant body in the whole of Northern Ireland, including the individual political parties. Why would she wait for the Committee to make proposals? The Committee needs to scrutinise her proposals, not the other way around.

Mervyn Storey referred to the assertion that the stakeholders' consultations were confidential. There are those among the stakeholders who know more about what is going on than Committee members or Assembly Members. That cannot be right.

Michelle O'Neill referred to the film 'Groundhog Day' to describe the way the debate comes back to the same points time after time. I had the misfortune to watch 'Groundhog Day' for the first time a few weeks ago, and a more tedious, boring film I have never seen.

Mr Kennedy: You are not very up to date, are you? *[Laughter.]*

Mr S Wilson: He does not have time to sit and watch the TV like you.

Mr Lunn: As Mr Wilson has said, I do not have as much time to watch TV as Mr Kennedy.

Mr Kennedy: I have not seen 'Groundhog Day'.

Mr Lunn: The Member is very lucky. The point is that it is boring and tedious, as is the requirement for the Committee to go back to the Minister time after time, asking the same questions and effectively getting the same answers. We received no answers to our questions today. I heard nothing about timescales or initiatives. The Minister tells us that everything is very advanced —

Mr Storey: The Minister — as she always does when she comes to the House — mentioned area planning. Members of the Education Committee will recall that when we met her in the Senate Chamber, she told us that she would come to the Committee with proposals on area planning in February. There are not

many days left in February, and we still do not know what her proposals are on area planning.

Mr Lunn: That is correct. There is one Friday left in February. I will not hold my breath.

The Minister also said that some Members, right around the Chamber, are afraid of change. The Alliance Party is not afraid of change; far from it. That is true of most Members. I will be careful where I look, but there may be a few diehards around who think that the present system is defensible.

Mr S Wilson: There is one on the roof. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lunn: I did not want to look at my own Chairman. *[Laughter.]*

There is an obvious need for change, and the sooner the better; we agree with the Minister on that.

The Minister also talked about a broad consensus around selection at 14. Some weeks ago, I would have agreed with her that that was so. Now, however, I am not so sure.

4.30 pm

Mrs Long: Does the Member agree that reaching consensus on a transfer at age 14 is one thing, but that reaching consensus on what will actually be done at that age is entirely different?

Mr Lunn: Yes, I was about to make that point. In the absence of firmer proposals and of knowledge of the Minister's thoughts, every party is developing their own ideas.

Mr S Wilson: Although I did not believe that consensus could be reached on transfer at age 14, many people did. Does the Member agree that, given that the Minister could not answer questions about many matters, including cost, the effect on the school estate, the size of schools, how far people in rural areas would have to travel, and about what type of selection would apply to 14-year-olds, people began to have doubts about whether she knew what she was talking about when she spoke about selection at that age?

Mr Lunn: The Member's point is well made.

I did not hear anything new from the Minister; I merely heard a restatement of what she said in the vision statement, the debate of 11 December 2007, and the Minister's comments to the Committee on 31 January 2008.

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: I am getting tired of giving way.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for giving way. He said that we are not getting any new answers. Will he agree that it is an absolute disgrace that I have been waiting for over 100 days for an answer to a written question? The Minister was given the opportunity to

deal with that during her contribution today, but again, we did not hear any answers.

Mr Lunn: A wait of 100 days for an answer must be a record, but we have all suffered at the hands of the Department or the Minister in having to wait for a long time for answers. I do not know why that is; I thought that the House had rules about such matters.

I will conclude shortly, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You will conclude now, Mr Lunn. Your time is up, and you will not be allowed any extra time. I know that almost every Member intervened during your 10 minutes, but time is added only if a Member has been given five minutes or less to speak.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 14; Noes 79.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Dallat, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr O'Loan, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Ramsey.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr P J Bradley and Mr Burns.

NOES

Mr Adams, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Lord Browne, Mr Butler, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Doherty, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr McGimpsey, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr B Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Lo and Mr McCarthy.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the lack of clarity in the Minister of Education's proposals for post-primary transfer; and urges her to bring details of her proposals immediately before the Executive and the Assembly, to ease the concerns of parents, pupils and teachers.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Housing in North Belfast

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have six minutes. I remind Members that, given that this is an Adjournment debate, I will listen carefully to ensure that Members speak only to the topic.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Business Committee for the opportunity to speak about the important matter of housing in North Belfast. I have dealt with the subject many times in the House and, because it is such an important matter to me and my constituents, I am sure that I will deal with it again. I also thank the Minister for Social Development for attending, and I am pleased to see other North Belfast MLAs in the Chamber.

This important issue affects many people throughout the constituency — from both the Catholic and Protestant communities. There is a chronic shortage of social and affordable housing in North Belfast. The problem is not new and has been recognised by many people for many years. Nevertheless, decades of underinvestment and underfunding have left social-housing stock close to breaking point. Some Housing Executive properties in North Belfast are almost 100 years old and no longer fit for purpose. The Minister is well aware that large areas of the constituency require urgent redevelopment. Last month, she met a large number of residents from the upper “long streets” area of New Lodge Road, who, for years, have campaigned for the redevelopment of their area.

It is only now that they can even consider the prospect of that necessary work being undertaken, and for that, the Minister must be congratulated. I know that the residents of the upper “long streets” were delighted with the Minister’s visit and the personal concern and interest that she showed.

As well as the redevelopment of existing older properties, there is a real need for additional newbuild housing development in North Belfast. At present, there are 2,352 people on the housing list in North Belfast, 1,401 of which have been designated as being in housing stress. Of those people in housing stress, 16% are elderly people, 34% are families, 5% are adults and 45% are single adults. The Housing Executive and the Department for Social Development have produced a document that they hope will be able to deal with some

of the most pertinent issues. That follows on from the housing strategy for North Belfast published in 2000.

Those in greatest need are families and single people living on their own — mostly males in their middle years. The latter problem has become increasingly evident and critical in the past number of years, and is due to lifestyle preference — people living on their own — marriage or relationship break-ups, or family division. That is an increasing phenomenon that must be taken seriously because it is a trend that is here to stay. Nonetheless, we must concentrate on families, because they are at the very heart of this housing crisis. There are 471 families in housing stress, and it is important that we address their plight.

Bearing in mind the sectarian history and geography of North Belfast, it is important to recognise that there are differences in the way in which this housing problem affects the Catholic and Protestant communities. Paddy McIntyre, the chief executive of the Housing Executive, said:

“The most significant barrier to delivering housing solutions in North Belfast is the segregated nature of housing. The presence of six major peace-lines is a key inhibitor to the freeing up of resources such as land, but since 2000 I am pleased to say that a number of community initiatives are underway to tackle the serious sectarian divisions which exist.”

Of the 471 families in housing stress that I mentioned earlier, 375 are Catholic and 96 are Protestant. In the single persons category, 469 are Catholic and 168 are Protestant. There is a total of 1,008 Catholics in housing stress, as opposed to 393 Protestants. Those figures illustrate the differential needs on a religious/community basis in North Belfast.

It is clear that the Catholic community has much greater needs than the Protestant community. I emphasise that that does not mean that the Protestant community does not have a significant housing problem in North Belfast. I do not seek to diminish Protestant housing need in North Belfast. However, there are different levels and types of housing need for each community in North Belfast. That has been officially recognised by the Housing Executive’s strategy, which emphasised the need for newbuilds in Catholic areas and the need to raise housing standards in Protestant areas. A two-pronged approach has been employed to address the differential needs in North Belfast.

The North Belfast Housing Strategy, which was launched in October 2000, was intended to serve as the blueprint for tackling the housing crisis over the following seven years.

It was estimated that £76 million might reasonably be spent on housing schemes in North Belfast. The Housing Executive conducted a review of the strategy between February and April 2007, which focused on the work carried out during the first five years of the

strategy. The strategy was an ambitious document, which, if successfully implemented, would have vastly improved the housing situation in North Belfast. At the time, I was hopeful that the strategy would meet the majority of the goals that it had set itself, but it is now becoming apparent that it will fail to meet a number of those goals. That is disappointing.

The main target was to build 1,750 new homes for social renting by 2007-08. From 2001 to 2006, a total of 1,248 new homes were built. That means that by the end of 2008-09, an additional 502 units will have to be constructed to fulfill that target figure of 1,750. The review indicated that the Housing Executive is well on course to meet that target, and there is a real possibility that it will build more houses than it originally intended. For that, it is to be commended.

The problem lies in the fact that the actual demand for social housing in 2008 now exceeds that which was predicted in 2000. In addition, many more people than was originally anticipated have now applied for social housing because of the massive increase in house prices over the past two years. In short, housing demand far outstrips supply. Put simply, we need more houses than was originally anticipated in 2000.

Although it seems as if the strategy will meet its targets for additional homes for social renting, it has fallen short on the number of re-lets that have been available each year. It was anticipated that there would be 520 re-lets each year, but, on average, the annual figure has been only 421 re-lets a year. The Housing Executive has attributed that to the settled nature of housing in a number of high-demand areas in the overall strategy area.

The strategy planned to invest an additional £15 million on the acquisition of land for new house-building programmes and £10 million to buy new homes on the open market to meet urgent need. The Housing Executive has failed to meet those targets. As of 2006-07, only £5.3 million has been spent on the purchase of land for new buildings and only £4.54 million for the purchase of homes on the open market. Again, the Housing Executive will have to explain and address those shortfalls.

When Minister Ritchie addressed the first meeting of the Committee for Social Development on 24 May 2007, her message was simple:

“Give me the money and I will build you the houses.”

The Budget allocation that the Minister negotiated for the Department for Social Development was one of the few real highlights of the Minister of Finance and Personnel's Thatcherite Budget. The Minister for Social Development fought tooth and nail to secure an additional £205 million over the next three years for social housing. She was criticised by Sinn Féin and the DUP for daring to criticise the inadequate Budget allocations for social housing. Those parties originally claimed that she did not need the money, but the Minister laid out her case in

the clearest way possible, and common sense and logic prevailed. The DUP/Sinn Féin Executive were ultimately forced to agree with the Minister's assessment.

The housing situation in North Belfast is critical and requires a serious and sustained effort by the Housing Executive in revisiting its strategy and reinforcing its efforts to address the problems. In order to speak about what must be done to alleviate this scenario, I have demonstrated to Members the facts of the situation. The Minister for Social Development has set herself a scheme of work, and, if she is allowed to fully implement it, it will do much to solve many of the problems that are now faced in North Belfast.

Part of the problem is the underuse of what is available. That may seem marginal and trivial in comparison with the overall problem, but there are 140 vacant homes in interface areas of North Belfast, and they are blighted by the fact that they are in such areas.

Consider the use that those homes could be put to, and the impact that that would have on the families in housing stress who I referred to earlier.

5.00 pm

I do not have time to talk about the many other aspects of housing in North Belfast. However, I want to draw attention to the fact that the development of the Girdwood/Crumlin Road jail site represents the best hope that many people in North Belfast have of finding suitable accommodation in the next few years. That particularly applies to families who are presently homeless and living in inadequate temporary accommodation. In terms of housing land, the availability of the Girdwood/Crumlin Road jail site should be seen as a windfall, and it is fortuitous that it is now available for social development.

My strong view is that the Girdwood site should be made available as soon as possible for social and affordable housing developments on a mixed tenure and mixed housing-type basis. I urge the Minister to work towards that in the near future. The Girdwood site could make substantial inroads into the obvious objective housing need in North Belfast. It could provide the space for 200 housing units at the very least. That should be a top priority, and it is one that I prevail upon the Minister to adopt.

The money is available, the building land is available, the housing need exists, and there is an irresistible argument — based on objective proven need — for using the site of the former military base for social housing and development. Furthermore, a fortuitous opportunity to do so has been provided by the release of that site. We should seize the opportunity, and, in that context, the whole community will win.

Mr McCausland: The issue of housing demand in North Belfast includes demand for social housing and other types of housing provision. Mr Maginness quoted

a significant number of figures, which I do not intend to rehearse.

Mr Maginness is right that the demand exists in both unionist and nationalist areas — that is clear. However, the different areas often have different needs. The need in nationalist areas is particularly reflected through housing lists, whereas, in unionist areas, it is reflected in housing lists but also in the growing demand for, and lack of, accessible good-quality private housing. As the demand exists in both communities, no distinction should be drawn between the two.

There is an ongoing situation in which people are moving into North Belfast from other areas — it is an increasingly popular area. I know of folk who have moved from the west of the Province into North Belfast looking for work in hospitals or other Government bodies, and they found that North Belfast was a particularly attractive place to live. Folk are also moving into North Belfast from west Belfast and Newtownabbey. I know of a number of recent private-housing schemes in which a significant section of the uptake was by people moving back into North Belfast who had previously moved to the Newtownabbey area.

However, the housing need will have been recognised and folk will move into those areas only when the houses have been built.

The BMAP also raises issues, because there is a need for land to be made available. I hope that that will be kept in mind when the BMAP process goes through its next stages. There is a particular need for land in the greater Ballysillan area of North Belfast where I was born and brought up, because any houses that have been built there have been bought immediately.

The number of single-person households is much higher than previously and influences the situation. The traditional pattern of houses with between four and seven occupants has disappeared in many places. The large rise in the number of single-person or two-person households has resulted in an increase in the demand for housing.

North Belfast has a significant number of long-term blocked-up houses. Some houses in the Silverstream estate have been blocked up for the past 15 years, and there is even a question about who owns them. That matter has been brought to the attention of the Minister, she has been considering it and her response is forthcoming. If that issue were addressed, it would significantly increase the number of available housing units. The redevelopment of areas often demonstrates the number of houses that are empty because they are being used as benefit drops. For example, it may turn out that when 60 houses are demolished to allow redevelopment, only 40 of the occupants immediately seek rehousing in the area. Such houses must be brought back into use.

I want to pick up on a point made by Mr Maginness about Girdwood Barracks and the Crumlin Road jail. He referred to the area as a “windfall site”. If the site is to succeed, it is crucial that it must be a shared site. No one, not even Alban Maginness, has managed to demonstrate how it can become a truly shared housing site.

The concerns of the unionist community in the area have not been alleviated by some of Alban Maginness’s past comments. Members will recall an incident in 2004, when the last of the families living in the heart of the Torrens area in North Belfast finally left their homes after years of intimidation by republicans. The departure of those folk was overseen by a Sinn Féin councillor from North Belfast, who was present as republicans drove workmen off the site as they attempted to erect a small fence to protect Protestant homes from serious and sustained sectarian attacks. Protestant families moved out after that indefensible and sustained attack by republicans. Two years later, in March 2006, when talking about housing need, Alban Maginness said:

“The windfall sites of Torrens and Girdwood will do much to relieve the pressure over the next two or three years but we are going to continue to have a short-term housing crisis in relation to the Catholic community in north Belfast.”

In other words, he said that the driving out of Protestant families was a “windfall”, a word that, to me, means an unexpected benefit. In that case it was not of benefit to those Protestant families who were driven out.

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

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank both Alban Maginness and Carál Ní Chuilín, because initially two motions on housing in North Belfast were submitted, and the Business Committee selected this one.

As Alban accurately detailed many of the relevant statistics, I will not go over them again. It is well known that North Belfast is an area of multiple deprivation. It suffers from deprivation in the areas of housing, fuel poverty, health, mental health, unemployment and education. There are over 600 hostel beds and several interfaces in the area. It has headed the Noble and Robson indices for a long period, and NISRA’s (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency) statistics put it at the top of the 900 most deprived areas in the North.

Therefore, there is a housing crisis. Alban Maginness spoke about the Housing Executive’s seven-year strategy, which was not comprehensive and did not deal with the housing crisis. As he pointed out, on a number of occasions, the Housing Executive did not deal with the huge waiting list: in December 2007, there were 2,452 people on the waiting list, over half of whom — 1,400 — were in housing stress.

Housing is, of course, a cross-community issue. Lack of housing is more of a problem in the nationalist

community than it is in the unionist community, but there is also the big problem of upgrading housing in sections of the unionist community in North Belfast. However, there is an issue of equality: over three quarters of the people on the waiting list for housing are nationalist. When we asked the Housing Executive for statistics, we were told that there was no data kept about religion or districts. I wonder why. The Minister might address that in her response. From other statistics, it is clear that there is a lack of equality in housing. Objective need and equality are at the heart of the Programme for Government and the Budget. Therefore, I ask the Minister if the housing issue in North Belfast will be equality proofed.

There is also an issue over what can be called “flat land”. All types of houses are being turned into apartments: developers move in, take over and renovate the properties. People then walk into the poverty trap, because the lack of housing means that they have to go to private landlords. That area has not been regulated for generations. I know that the Minister already spoke at Question Time, but I would like her to address the important issue of regulation.

I am disappointed that Nelson McCausland sectarianised the housing issue; politicians must try not to do that. Lack of housing affects all the people of North Belfast whether they are in Carrick Hill, Glenbryn, the “long streets” area of New Lodge, Ardoyne or Ligoniel. Before I became a junior Minister, I was on the steering group for the Girdwood site; in the mission statement, it was agreed by all parties — including the DUP — that housing would be an essential part of the project. In answer to Alban Maginness, Mr McCausland began talking about shared space and ended up talking about shared-housing space. There is a difference — Girdwood is a landfill site. Also, housing cannot be built without amenities such as leisure facilities, of which there is a dearth in nationalist areas of North Belfast.

There was a coming together among the parties on the Girdwood site, and there is almost agreement on it. I ask unionist Members to acknowledge that there is a huge waiting list for housing and that the Girdwood site can deal with some of it. No one — not Alban Maginness, the Minister or anyone else — wants to use the entire site for housing. However, not to use a section of the site for housing would be a huge mistake.

I welcome the Minister’s interest in North Belfast — as Alban Maginness stated, she has visited the area on a number of occasions. She mentioned that she would make an announcement tomorrow, to which I look forward. As was stated, if the Minister gets the money, the houses will be built; the proof is in the pudding. The Adjournment debate concerns a constituency that has suffered from multiple deprivation over a long period, and many people will be interested in it who

look to the Minister for hope. I hope that that will be forthcoming in her statement.

There is a need, a human cry, for a substantial investment because of the significant injection that was allocated in the Budget period. I hope that we have a shared North Belfast, and things are improving. There is a Minister and a junior Minister from North Belfast, and a number of MLAs, and it is important that we get together to try to sort out the housing problem across the board. Go raibh maith agat.

5.15 pm

Mr Dodds: It is a pleasure to take part in the debate on this important subject. I want to add to what my colleague Nelson McCausland has said about housing need, and it is important to re-emphasise one point. Alban Maginness talked about different “levels” of needs. That is not the right way to approach the issue: it is that there are different “kinds” of needs. There are needs on both sides of the community in North Belfast.

People are living in stressful housing situations in unionist and nationalist, Protestant and Catholic communities, and that has already been mentioned. It is reflected on the nationalist side through people on waiting lists. However, for many years there has been housing need and the need to regenerate unionist areas. Sadly, for many years there was a total lack of interest by many in authority, and those who represented the area, for the regeneration of those areas. I am glad that some of those issues have been addressed.

It is fair to say that there are different types of housing need across the board — and that is how we should approach the issue. The demand for social and private housing is growing in unionist areas as well as nationalist areas, and that is to be welcomed.

However, we must get on with the programme of regeneration in North Belfast. There are many areas where that is happening far too slowly. One example is the Fortwilliam/Queen Victoria Gardens area in North Belfast, which has very poor housing conditions and continuing housing blight. The area has suffered for many years — part of it was featured in the film, ‘Closing the Ring’, and one reason why it was chosen was because it fitted in well with scenes of Second World War devastation. In some cases, that is what the houses look like, which is a disgrace in this day and age.

Work on the regeneration scheme started in 2001. I received a letter from the Minister on 21 October 2007 — and I appreciate her response to me — indicating that consideration was still being given to the economic appraisal and apologising for the length of time it was taking to get the matter sorted out. I have still had no confirmation that the matter is reaching a conclusion. I urge the Minister to get a move on. When local people hear a lot of talk about regeneration but see no real action, it breeds a lack of confidence and despair.

The level of regeneration and put-back is far too low, and is unacceptable. The Housing Executive is proposing to knock down 112 houses in Rosebank Street, Columbia Street and Ohio Street and is proposing to replace them with 37 houses. Those streets are well occupied and contain vibrant communities. The Housing Executive has no proposals for the overspill, and that must be addressed. That is one example, but it illustrates a more general problem. There is also a need to do more work on regeneration in the Tiger's Bay area of my constituency, and I know that the Housing Executive wants to consult with local people there.

Has the Minister any specific plans about the budget and the resources that will follow through from that clear housing regeneration need. There must be a firm follow-through on the amount of time and effort needed on consultation.

Members raised the issue of flats. In all local communities, whether settled, privately occupied areas or areas of social housing tenure, there is great concern among many local people about the prevalence of flats and apartments. Over the years, the Housing Executive has sold land to private developers and has put no constraints on the future use of that land. Land has been banked for years — particularly in and around the Crumlin Road/lower Shankill area — and I understand that in the lower Shankill area, from Agnes Street to Peter's Hill, there are planning applications for 1,200 flats. Some of those applications are on land that was previously owned by the Housing Executive and was sold off for pennies. That matter must be addressed; otherwise the authorities can be accused, rightly, of abdicating responsibility for an over-provision of the type of accommodation that is not wanted, and the lack of social housing provision.

With regard to the lack of investment, there is a growing dependency on the private-rented sector to fill housing need. That has led to problems in many areas, where more and more landlords are buying properties, changing the character of areas, putting tenants in and charging rent, all while taking very little responsibility for the future of an area. That must be examined. I advocate a licensing scheme for landlords, thus ensuring much higher standards in that sector than exist at present.

It is clear that the Housing Executive is adopting a policy, particularly in unionist areas, of selling vacant sites to the private sector. For example, in lower Oldpark, there is a major vacant site that could be used to build affordable housing. I call on the Minister for Social Development to examine that.

Finally, I know that my time is up, but I was interested to hear what Alban Maginness said about the Girdwood site. He failed to mention the issue of a shared future. He also failed to refer to the work of the panel, to which

Gerry Kelly referred, that came up with the view that there could be no agreement on housing, because, primarily, it could not meet the shared-future criteria. If we are to make progress on that site, we must do so by reaching an agreement that does not threaten anyone and that provides for a shared future.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Alban Maginness for proposing this subject for the Adjournment debate. It is interesting that, every time that we talk about social housing, particularly in nationalist or interface areas, the argument about a shared future is brought up. If we are talking about housing need, that is what we must address. There is a variety of housing need. We faced the same situation in Carrick Hill and in other areas. I would like to think that such arguments will be relegated to the past and that we will move on.

As a member of the Girdwood advisory panel, I can say that Nigel Dodds was correct to say that it could not reach a consensus. However, the panel's mission statement still stands, and some sort of mixed-tenure housing must be built on the site.

Several Members mentioned statistics. On average, between 74% and 86% of people on the waiting list for housing in North Belfast are nationalists. That percentage may fluctuate, but it rarely falls below 70%. Housing allocation must be based on need, not creed. I do not wish to sectarianise the debate, but that housing stress and need must be addressed.

We need to examine redevelopment and regeneration. I look forward to the Minister's statement to the House tomorrow on how she proposes to proceed. I would like to think that, following that statement, all the representatives of North Belfast will be able to make progress together in some shape or form, despite our disagreements.

I look forward to an announcement about the upper "long streets" and, in particular, the urban renewal assessment (URA) areas. Without attempting to prejudge, guess or suss what the Minister will say, I live in that area. My house, although privately owned, is old and expensive to look after. People in the area are anticipating change. The URAs, which have taken place across North Belfast — albeit at a slower pace than we would have liked — have raised hopes and aspirations. People are hanging on to those hopes and waiting to see what will happen.

Through personal contact, the Minister has become aware of the issues, and she has gained first-hand knowledge of what it is like for people to live in those areas and in those conditions. There is evidence — not only anecdotal — that, to date, the housing strategy for North Belfast has failed many people. We have an opportunity to examine the outcomes of the review and to address the issues.

Many Members are worried about the increased poverty and deprivation suffered by families who, through no choice of their own, have to move into private-rented accommodation. More often than not, housing benefit does not meet the full cost of their rent. People have to dip into a purse that is already stretched. The adage about the choice between heating and eating is true; the same choice about paying the rent is becoming a fact of life.

As for affordability, when I was canvassing, many families asked me how their children would ever get on to the property ladder. Members must face the affordability issue.

I return to the matter of Girdwood Barracks. Its redevelopment represents a windfall, and it is an opportune site for social development and regeneration. There is an opportunity for North Belfast to do something different and to address people's needs. That project will be subject to an equality impact assessment, which is a statutory responsibility. I look forward to that responsibility being fulfilled.

I also look forward to everyone's realising that building social and affordable housing is absolutely necessary in North Belfast. Without wishing to sound glib, I welcome the fact that Alban Maginness has become involved as another housing champion. It boggled my mind, along with his unionist colleagues, when he blocked the application for the acquisition for social housing of the former site of the Milk Marketing Board. I wondered whether his mentality was one of "not in my backyard".

The people whom I represent in North Belfast are waiting for homes, and particular types of social housing — not the "seven towers" type of social housing or the type that crams families into two rooms. They are waiting and looking forward to the opportunities that affordable housing can provide. Those families are waiting for equal treatment and they expect us to deliver on their behalf.

I am glad to have had an opportunity to speak in the Adjournment debate. I look forward to the Minister's response. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Ford: I thank Alban Maginness for securing this debate, and Carál Ní Chuilín for her request.

The level of demand for social housing in North Belfast is so large that it is not an issue that solely relates to the current boundaries of that constituency. Much of the rapid population growth, which has expanded into the constituency of South Antrim, is driven by the inability of people from North Belfast to secure housing in the area where they want to live. Many who have moved to my constituency are relatively well off; others are left trapped in the city, because they are unable to afford what is on offer. As Nelson McCausland highlighted earlier, some people, having sampled the

delights of Newtownabbey and points beyond, are now moving back into the city. That may be an issue for Translink to address.

In the midst of a debate dominated by statistics and figures — and we have heard a number of them already — we should not forget the human cost of the social housing crisis that exists in an acute way in North Belfast, compared to other regions. The consequences of overcrowded and inadequate housing — or even a complete lack of housing — include disruption to children's education, poor physical and mental health, stress on family relationships and difficulties in employment. The housing crisis has a direct and perceptible impact on the poor socio-economic conditions endured by many people in North Belfast, and those issues are too real to be reduced to bare statistics.

Some of the factors that feed into the housing crisis are not unique to North Belfast. A frenzied property market has left people unable to afford private-sector rents, and even more unable to afford to purchase a home. Many young people, even those who traditionally would have been able to access housing in the private sector now cannot do so, with the result that social housing is overwhelmed at a time when there has never been less availability. With relatively low wages and a traditionally high level of social housing, North Belfast has been impacted by those fractures particularly strongly.

One cluster of issues affects the housing market in North Belfast more deeply than in any other area: sectarianism, segregation and intimidation. Members from both sides of the House have already indicated the degree of imbalance in need in North Belfast. However, it must be remembered that the suffering of a family in housing need is the same, regardless of what their community background may be. The single biggest reason for that imbalance is that too many areas in North Belfast have become the exclusive preserve of one section of the community or another. The type of healthy, gradual change in communities that would have taken place without that division has been arrested.

Nigel Dodds has already said that different types of housing need exist in different areas across the constituency so that, today, there is a situation whereby Catholic areas are drastically overcrowded and Protestant areas suffer from decay.

5.30 pm

The only solution to the problem in the long term is to get away from the concept of Catholic and Protestant areas altogether. Before I am accused of naivety, I must add that that cannot be achieved overnight or be achieved easily. Tackling the legacy of division in North Belfast is a project that will probably take a generation, but that is absolutely no reason not

to start. Churches may be built for Catholics or Protestants, but houses should be built for people.

The allocation of housing on the basis of need — and only on the basis of need — was one of the key demands of the civil rights movement. It is a sign of how things have moved over the last four decades that it can now be seen as politically acceptable to some to allocate housing, in part, on the basis of community background. To allow such divisions to trap families in appalling physical circumstances is a terrible indictment of our society, and it is not acceptable to the Alliance Party.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member agree that, not only is it necessary to have good housing development, but that that housing development must be of a high quality to meet the real needs of the people? Will he agree that the type of development that took place at the former site of the Milk Marketing Board was the result of sustained representation by local people, and me, as a local representative, to get high-quality housing for working people?

Mr Ford: I cannot go into the minutiae of North Belfast, but I agree with the Member's fundamental point: it is essential to provide good-quality housing for everyone in the community, whatever section of society that they come from. Allocation purely on the basis of need would be the only acceptable mechanism in any other country. I make no apology for saying that it must be the basis here.

The golden opportunity for kick-starting change that is presented by the Girdwood site has already been highlighted. Earlier today, the Minister said that she remained absolutely committed to social housing on a shared, equal basis on the site, and I agree. Although Gerry Kelly and Nigel Dodds pointed out the difficulties, there is a clear need to use Girdwood as a demonstration of what can be achieved. North Belfast desperately needs good-quality social housing to be an important part of the mix at the Girdwood site. Families who are in housing stress desperately need good homes, and North Belfast needs an end to segregation and intimidation. It needs practical steps towards a shared future, and that must be shown in other areas of North Belfast.

The Minister highlighted areas in which she hopes to make progress on shared housing. I hope that when she next answers a question in the Assembly, she will be able to announce that a part of North Belfast is also on the list for such a scheme.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I thank my party colleague Alban Maginness for giving the Assembly the opportunity to discuss the housing situation in North Belfast. He tabled the debate a considerable time ago, and some two weeks ago, it was selected for debate.

Mr Maginness and the other Members who spoke — the representatives from North Belfast and the Member for South Antrim Mr Ford — clearly characterised the housing situation in North Belfast. They also spoke about the need for a consensus on a shared future in housing, and I am glad about that. The debate is timely as it comes ahead of my statement to the Assembly tomorrow, which will set out my overall plans for social and affordable housing in the North of Ireland.

In addition to answering questions in the Assembly, meeting deputations and dealing with much correspondence, I have visited North Belfast many times. I have seen at first hand the housing challenges, including problems with pigeon waste, that face, among other areas, New Lodge, “seven towers”, “long streets”, Duncairn Gardens, Oldpark, Tiger's Bay, Sailortown, Carrick Hill, Brown's Row, Crumlin Road, Limestone Road, Ligoniel and Ardoyne. In the early 1980s, when sectarian divisions were high and trouble was very bad, I worked in North Belfast. Therefore, I can safely say that I know the area quite well.

I accept that North Belfast has many unique factors that make the housing situation difficult. It is an area of many interfaces, and it contains communities within communities. There are difficulties in obtaining land suitable for development. There are housing shortages in areas perceived to be nationalist and problems of poor conditions in areas perceived to be loyalist. It is still a polarised area, and that can limit the room for manoeuvre.

In March 2000, there were 880 applicants with 30 or more housing points. Eighty per cent of those applicants were from the nationalist community, and 43% of them were families. That was unlike the waiting list trend in the rest of Northern Ireland, where single people made up the largest section of the waiting list.

I have listened carefully to the points made about the composition of the waiting list. In 2000, the Housing Executive set out a seven-year investment strategy that was designed to tackle a need for increased housing mainly — but not exclusively — in the nationalist community and to address poor housing conditions substantially — but again not exclusively — in the loyalist community.

The strategy estimated that £133 million would be invested in the area up to March 2007, and it proposed that 1,750 new social housing units should be provided. It identified five key themes to bring about regeneration: housing supply; better use of stock; improvement of Housing Executive stock; sustaining and improving private housing areas; and promoting regeneration.

Progress has been made since the implementation of the strategy, despite many incidents of civil unrest in some areas in the early days. As well as local tensions, problems were exacerbated by soaring property and

land prices, which affected our ability to secure development opportunity sites due to competition from private developers. Like the rest of Northern Ireland, social waiting lists began to grow significantly in North Belfast. However, despite all those difficulties, by the end of March 2008 about £258 million will have been invested against the target of £133 million, and building will have started on 1,600 homes.

To put the north Belfast development programme into context, from 2001 to 2007, investment represented almost 20% of the total Northern Ireland programme and almost one third of the Belfast programme. Unfitness levels reduced from 9·4% in 2000 to 5·5% by 2004. I expect that figure to have fallen to 4% when the final report of the house condition survey is published later this year.

Urban renewal areas have been completed in Glenbryn, Grove, Lower New Lodge, Clifton/Oldpark, North Queen Street and Rosewood/Crumlin. Work is continuing in Torrens, Gainsborough and Mountcollyer. Renewal proposals are being considered for Upper New Lodge, Parkside and Queen Victoria Gardens.

Mr Dodds referred to the economic appraisal for Queen Victoria Gardens and Fortwilliam. There has been a delay, and this afternoon I instructed my officials to expedite matters on that issue.

By March 2008, more than £60 million will have been invested in maintaining and improving the Housing Executive stock in areas such as Lower Oldpark, Ballybone, Jamaica Street and Sunningdale. Improvement works are also proposed in Tiger's Bay and Lower Oldpark.

North Belfast received 70% of the budget for the group repair scheme, and about £20 million will have been invested in private-sector grants by March 2008.

The structure of housing demand has changed significantly. Single-person households now account for 45% of the waiting list. Demand from families decreased from 42% of the overall waiting list in March 2000 to 34%, although in real terms the number of applicants has increased from 354 in March 2000 to 461 in March 2007. More than 70% of family applicants are lone parents — a trend evident elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

Against the background of those changes, the housing strategy has been revisited and reviewed. The exercise has included an examination of the strategic planning context, demographic trends, the housing context and the housing programme. The Housing Executive will publish the findings soon. Those who are directly affected by the shortfall in housing will want to see more being done, and I, as Minister, also want to see the housing problems alleviated. However, I have to ensure that available resources are allocated to meet need across Northern Ireland.

North Belfast has been singled out for special attention for a number of years, and that has borne fruit, but other areas are exhibiting the same or greater levels of need now, and their needs must be addressed. However, North Belfast will continue to see considerable investment, and that will be set out in the revised strategy.

The housing strategy includes a potentially exciting and innovative project in Great Georges Street, which will provide many social and private homes. I welcome the investment and regeneration that will result in that area. Last week, I had a meeting with the St Patrick's and St Joseph's Housing Committee at which we discussed that issue, among others.

My Department has also been involved in developing master plans for a number of sectors in the inner city. One master plan that covers the north-west quarter impacts on North Belfast. Following detailed consideration of the consultation responses to the 'North West Quarter Part 2: Baseline Regeneration Issues Report', my Department is finalising its approach to the regeneration of the north-west quarter area part 2, and I intend to announce details by 30 April.

I am aware of the housing needs in North Belfast, and I accept that the nature and location of housing remains a contentious issue in that area. Members will be aware that proposals for the regeneration and redevelopment of the combined site of the Crumlin Road jail and the former Girdwood Barracks in North Belfast are contained in a draft master plan about which I launched a public consultation on 16 October. The draft master plan illustrates the entire site's potential to be a major driver in the physical, social and economic regeneration of North Belfast. It does not preclude any type of use for the site — including housing and social housing — and I emphasised that on the day that I announced the draft master plan.

It is my hope that the site will be developed as a place where people of all persuasions can live, work and socialise, and, hence, live up to the desire for a shared and equal future. I will say more about the Crumlin Road jail/Girdwood site in tomorrow's statement.

I heard what Alban Maginness and other Members said during the Adjournment debate. I recognise and acknowledge that much remains to be done to address the complex housing problems in North Belfast.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to draw her remarks to a close.

Ms Ritchie: I do not want anyone to leave the Chamber believing that the story is one of doom and gloom. Members raised other issues during the debate, and I will respond to them in writing.

Adjourned at 5.43 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 26 February 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr

Mr Speaker: Before we move to the first item of business, I advise the House that I have received a request from Mr Ian Paisley Jnr, seeking to make a personal statement to the House. I stress that this is a personal, not a ministerial, statement.

I have agreed to Mr Paisley's request, and I will call him to make his statement in a moment. Before I do so, however, I remind Members of the conventions under which the statement will be made.

A personal statement is not subject to intervention or debate. Where a statement relates to a Member's resignation from Government, as it does in this case, I will allow those party leaders — or their representatives — who wish to comment on the statement an opportunity to do so. However, each leader's comments should be brief and should reflect the length of the statement itself.

If that is clear, I call Mr Paisley Jnr to make his personal statement.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I wish to inform the Assembly that today I wrote to the First Minister, informing the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) of my resignation from the Government.

I want to place on record that I have been honoured to serve this country and, indeed, honoured to serve under the leadership of the First Minister in particular. I leave with high hopes, in good spirit, with deep humility and with gratefulness in my heart. Thank you.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: As the First Minister, on behalf of members of my office and of those of the deputy First Minister's office, I would just like to say a word of thanks to my son Ian for the hard work he did while he was in office. We wish him well in the future.

Mr Adams: Go raibh míle maith agat. I also wish the Member well. He and his father played a key role

in the work to restore these institutions and to bring unionism into this process. Undoubtedly, there would not be any working political institutions at this time without the leadership of the Paisley family, and they deserve credit for that.

Of course, there are questions to be answered about the issues that led to the Member's resignation. Sad though it is for the Member and his family, the matter also serves to highlight the unacceptable behaviour of some parties and Members. Sinn Féin will seek to end certain practices, including that whereby Members can use public moneys to rent properties from family members. Public confidence is essential —

Mr Speaker: I remind the Member that he must keep his comments to the statement.

Mr Adams: Public confidence is essential, and the public is entitled to expect the highest standards from everyone in public life. We have a responsibility to ensure that that is the case.

I wish the Member well, and I commend him for the leadership role that he has taken and for the work that he has brought to all of us here.

Mr Speaker: No other party leaders have indicated that they wish to speak — I am sorry — I call Mr Durkan.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I note Mr Paisley's expression of deep humility. I welcome that, because we all know the saying that pride comes before a fall. There was some evidence of vanity in some of the statements that were made last week, so I welcome today's expression of humility.

We all know the issues and the circumstances that mounted up to lead to this resignation. Although those matters might be addressed, we should all have the good grace to reflect on the fact that Mr Paisley obviously did good work during his time in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and that he made other positive contributions.

Mr Ford: I, too, recognise that in the manner of his resignation statement, Mr Paisley has redeemed a little of what went before. It is clear that the Executive will have to address many issues to ensure that we do not run into similar problems in the future with other Ministers and to ensure that the highest standards of probity are maintained. However, the manner of Mr Paisley's resignation may mean that that will happen.

Mr Speaker: Order. No other party leader has indicated that he or she wants to speak, so I will move on.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill has received Royal Assent. The Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 became law on 25 February 2008.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

British-Irish Council Summit

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 British-Irish Council (BIC) summit.

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): In compliance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we wish to make the following report on the tenth summit meeting of the British-Irish Council, which was held in Dublin on 14 February 2008. All Northern Ireland Ministers who attended the summit have approved the report, which we also make on their behalf.

The Irish Government hosted the summit in the Royal Hospital Kilmainham. The heads of delegations were welcomed by the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern. The British Government delegation were led by the Rt Hon Paul Murphy, Secretary of State for Wales. The Welsh Assembly Government were represented by the First Minister, the Rt Hon Rhodri Morgan, and the Scottish Executive by the First Minister, the Rt Hon Alex Salmond. The States of Guernsey Government were represented by the Chief Minister, Mike Torode, and the States of Jersey Government by the Chief Minister, Senator Frank Walker. The Isle of Man Government were represented by the Chief Minister, Tony Brown.

In addition to the deputy First Minister, junior Ministers and I, the Northern Ireland delegation comprised the Minister of Education, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister for Social Development.

A full list of the participants is attached to the statement provided to Members.

The British-Irish Council meeting was the second since the restoration of the institutions last May. The Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, chaired the meeting, which focused on the misuse of drugs; the strategic review of the British-Irish Council; and a report on progress in the various BIC sectoral areas.

The Irish Government lead the sectoral discussion on the misuse of drugs. Problem drug use is a complex and difficult issue — it affects all member Administrations, and was a particular focus of the summit discussion. The misuse of drugs can have a devastating effect on the family, and the Council discussed the importance of supporting families to overcome the problems that they face and the role that families can play in the rehabilitation process. The Council reflected

on the impacts of problem drug use on families and how those could be used in the development of drug and/or alcohol strategies. We discussed the need to further develop advice and guidance for families, and to improve support to families in dealing with drugs treatment and rehabilitation processes.

The Council recognised the importance of strategies to reduce the potential harm to the children of problem drug users. The Council also considered ways to utilise the potential of families as agents for drug-use recovery. Ministers agreed to include a renewed focus on the families of problem drug users in any future drug strategies, with a view to providing increased support to those families, and to better harness their potential to facilitate life improvements for problem drug users.

At the last summit meeting in Belfast, it was agreed to undertake a strategic review of the Council, and to consider work programmes, working methods and support arrangements, including those for a standing secretariat. That work was taken forward by the British-Irish Council secretariat in liaison with the member Administrations, and an interim report was considered by Ministers at the summit.

The Council recognised the potential for the British-Irish Council to strengthen relations between member Administrations and welcomed the interim report of the strategic review. Specifically, the Council noted the progress to date, including the consensus that a standing secretariat be a single, co-located model. Ministers tasked the current secretariat, in liaison with the member Administrations, to proceed with further detailed work on the governance, staffing, location, costing and funding of a standing secretariat.

Ministers noted the current work programme of the Council and agreed to further consideration by member Administrations that would take into account the review of the existing work sectors and possible new areas of work. In considering those possible new areas of work, the First Minister for Wales reported that the early-years policy was a wide-ranging area. It touched on issues of education, social care, children's rights, social inclusion and economic advantage. Although there was considerable diversity across the BIC Administrations in the approach to early-years provision, through sharing policy, practice and research, there could be a shared commitment to ensure that every child has the best possible start in life.

10.45 am

The Scottish First Minister, proposing energy as a new work stream, highlighted key goals and challenges that must be faced by all member Administrations. Those include the need to reduce emissions, to ensure security of energy supplies by fostering a diverse and

competitive energy market, and to deliver energy at a price that is affordable for individuals and businesses.

On behalf of the Executive, our delegation raised the important issue of child protection and reported on the debate on the subject in this Assembly in October 2007. The Council agreed that child protection is vital, that it is essential to build on the existing arrangements between the member Administrations, and to consider how child protection measures could be further developed through enhanced collaboration and co-operation.

We also raised the growing problem of suicide among young people, following a significant increase in the number of suicides. We raised concerns about the negative impact that some websites and Internet chat rooms can have on people at times of crisis in their lives.

The Council agreed that officials should consider the inclusion of early-years policy, energy and child protection — including the growing problem of suicide among young people — in the BIC work programme. It should also consider how best those should be led in the course of the review of BIC.

The Council also discussed and noted the current working methods of BIC. It agreed that the matter should be considered further in order to facilitate effective and dynamic working arrangements and to explore methods of raising the profile of the Council, including the development of the BIC website. In concluding that discussion, the Council tasked the secretariat, in liaison with member Administrations, to report back with final recommendations on the strategic review at the next summit in Scotland. The meeting noted the ongoing work of the British-Irish Council and progress across the range of work sectors, and looked forward to a full and active programme of work for the coming year.

The Council noted the recent meeting of Environment Ministers in Northern Ireland, and welcomed plans for a number of ministerial meetings in other sectors in the first half of 2008. It noted, in particular, progress in the various BIC sectoral areas, including drug misuse, the environment, the knowledge economy, social inclusion, tourism, health, minority and lesser-used languages, and demography.

In relation to transport, which is led by Northern Ireland, all parties remain committed to the introduction, as soon as possible, of arrangements for the mutual recognition of driving disqualifications between Ireland and the United Kingdom. In addition, work is under way on potential areas for UK-Ireland co-operation in the mutual recognition of lesser infringements of road traffic law, including possible penalty-point recognition between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The British-Irish Council is also

examining the potential to share research on drink- and drug-driving with a view to developing best practice and sharing campaign research and publicity strategies across member Administrations.

The member Administrations are also working together to share information and experience in the area of accessible transport and to explore issues of common interest in relation to sustainable travel.

BIC is also examining transport links between Administrations in recognition of the economic importance of key strategic connections.

The next BIC summit will be hosted by the Scottish Government in September 2008, at a venue to be announced.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): I welcome the First Minister's statement. Will he confirm that he is content for his officials to brief the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the interim report of the strategic review of the British-Irish Council? That is important to the Committee.

Wearing my party-political hat, I wish to make some further points. The Northern Ireland Executive delegation appeared to be the largest at the BIC summit. There were reasons for that, of course, on which the First Minister may wish to comment.

I welcome the discussion on the problems that are associated with drug and alcohol addiction. Does the First Minister agree with the deputy First Minister's comments at his press conference after the BIC summit, which highlighted the power of the media? The deputy First Minister criticised television soap operas such as 'EastEnders' and 'Coronation Street' for their potentially harmful effect on impressionable people.

Does the First Minister envisage that those concerns will be raised with the broadcasting authorities? Will those concerns include the depiction of violence on television? Will the First Minister outline how BIC officials intend to deal with the grave issue of teenage suicide and the effects of websites and Internet chat rooms?

The First Minister: I welcome discussions with the honourable gentleman's Committee. I will facilitate such a meeting with the relevant officials to ensure that matters of concern are examined thoroughly. That would be profitable for all concerned.

My attitude to drink is well known. I do not partake of it, and I do not relish it. However, the deputy First Minister is responsible for his own language, and he can defend himself. It is sad that propaganda-style programmes, which are available for public viewing, sell the notion that a boy becomes a man once he can drink well. That is a tragedy, and we should set our

faces against encouraging young people to take the road of drinking, especially in the way that it is practised by many young people today. We have a responsibility to display our attitude and lead by example.

The matters raised by the honourable Member are important. It is appropriate that any Minister who has an interest in the summit's agenda has a right to attend that summit — and should attend it. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, who is a member of Mr Kennedy's party, attended the previous summit and made valuable contributions to discussions on children and the menace of suicide, which is such a relevant consideration today.

It is justifiable for Ministers to take time off to attend those important meetings. I am sure that the meetings are helpful to Ministers when they make Executive decisions.

Mr Moutray: I thank the First Minister for his statement. Given the importance of the British-Irish Council's role, will the First Minister indicate how the St Andrews commitment to the establishment of a standing secretariat is being met?

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

The First Minister: The Member will be aware that the St Andrews Agreement provided that, after consultation and with the agreement of members, the two Governments would facilitate the establishment of a standing secretariat for the British-Irish Council. Having consulted member Administrations, I am pleased to report that a consensus supports the establishment of a standing secretariat. The proposal is that that would consist of a co-located team of staff who would work inclusively on the British-Irish Council, and BIC's secretariat, in conjunction with member Administrations, will now give further consideration to issues of governance, staffing, location, costing and funding. Those issues will come back for further discussion, and BIC, if it considers it appropriate, will point members on the right road. The matter is under intense scrutiny; I cannot comment any further than that.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the First Minister for his statement. Tá mé buíoch díot. Suicide prevention was discussed at the summit, which is to be welcomed. Concerns were raised about the negative impact that some websites and Internet chat rooms can have on people at times of crisis in their lives. Will the First Minister indicate what measures are being contemplated to deal with that matter?

The First Minister: I am sorry, but I cannot give the Member any further information. The issue is being discussed at the highest possible level. No doubt, we will receive a communication, and the matter will be discussed at the next summit. Given the urgency of

the matter, we need an immediate report. Everyone who is interested in suicide prevention should be cognisant of BIC's views.

Mr Durkan: I thank the First Minister for his report and, through him, his ministerial colleagues for their work at the summit. I agree with the First Minister that the Northern Ireland Ministers who attended this important summit dealt with the range of subjects very well.

As far back as 2001-02, there was general agreement about the benefits of a standing secretariat for BIC, and I welcome progress on that issue.

Will future British-Irish Council summits be used as a means to address the issue of the misuse of prescription drugs, which is a growing problem that challenges all the Administrations?

Will higher-level transport issues be discussed, beyond driving disqualifications, such as the curbing of vehicles' CO2 emissions?

Will future British-Irish Council summits consider marine management throughout these islands? The UK marine Bill will provide for a marine management organisation, and our Minister of the Environment has said that she wants discrete arrangements for Northern Ireland. The future of marine management should be discussed properly at British-Irish Council level, so that we have a common framework throughout these islands, because the marine environment is something that all these islands share.

11.00 am

The First Minister: I believe that we will have a very considered look at the drugs problem, and that we will all share information as a result of what has been experienced by the co-members of the BIC. Therefore, we will have an overall look at a very important subject for parents bringing up children.

As regards the general co-operation, that will be helpful in all those areas mentioned by the honourable Member. All are very important, and I would not like to say that one was more important than another because they all need to be faced, and faced with the determination that these matters can be dealt with and can be cured. We are not facing a challenge that cannot be defeated. In the number of counsellors, an old book says, "there is safety", so in the number of these counsellors, I think that there will be safety.

Mr Ford: I welcome the progress that has been made on the secretariat, and the introduction by Northern Ireland Ministers of child protection and suicide prevention into the discussions.

If I may, however, turn to transport, an area in which the First Minister highlighted that Northern Ireland takes the lead. I note that despite the large number of

Ministers who attended the BIC summit, neither Mrs Foster nor Mr Murphy, the two responsible Ministers in this area, were present. Yet the First Minister tells us that it was right that any Minister with an interest should have been there. Is this why the statement is full of phrases such as: "as soon as possible"; "work is under way"; "examining the potential"; "share research"; "share information"; "explore issues"; and there is actually nothing specific?

In particular, given the total imbalance in public-private transport expenditure in this region, how can we possibly take a lead in issues such as sustainable travel?

The First Minister: Ministers, of course, answer to us all as to whether they go or stay. However, I am sure that those Ministers who were unable to be with us on that occasion had reasons due to important matters in their own Departments that needed their immediate attention. They have to justify their non-attendance themselves.

However, as I outlined in my statement, the Northern Ireland Administration led on transport. The British-Irish Council is committed to introducing, as soon as possible, arrangements for the mutual recognition of driving disqualifications between Ireland and the UK. Work is also under way on potential areas of co-operation between the UK and Ireland on mutual recognition of the lesser infringements of road traffic law, including possible recognition of penalty points between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The transport sector is also looking at links between Administrations in recognition of the economic importance of key strategic connections. Member Administrations are also working together to share information on accessible transport and sustainable travel. I am sure that we all wish them well as they do this very important work.

Mr Storey: The issue of the Ballycastle-Campbeltown ferry was discussed at a previous BIC summit in Belfast. Will the First Minister provide an update on the timetable for the completion of the options and economic appraisal of the restoration of the service?

The First Minister: I am sure that the Member wants to declare his interest in this matter, and I, too, declare my interest in it. Our officials are working with Scottish Government officials to deliver advice to respective Ministers on the outcome of the new options and economic appraisal.

That appraisal will examine the case for restoring the ferry service and, in particular, its feasibility and value for money. At the bilateral meeting in Scotland last week, a declaration was signed, giving a commitment to consider urgently the feasibility study on the possible reinstatement of the ferry service as soon as it is available. The options and economic appraisal are expected to be completed by late summer 2008,

after which further decisions on the restoration of the ferry service will have to be made.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an ráiteas.

In considering progress in the various sectoral areas, including indigenous, minor and lesser-used languages, did the Council note the distinct absence of a strategy emanating from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure aimed at enhancing and promoting the Irish language, as provided for in the St Andrews Agreement? Like David Ford, I notice that the Ministers who were absent included Minister Edwin Poots — perhaps that is not surprising given the context.

Secondly, will the First Minister state whether the Council considered forging closer links with the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body (BIIPB)? I particularly commend a report from Committee D of BIIPB that considered the health inequalities being suffered by the Irish community in Britain.

The First Minister: Those matters were not discussed fully. Each person who made a contribution mentioned issues that were of concern to him or her. All I can say is that language is not really a matter that comes under the remit of BIC. There are other places where such matters can be discussed in full. I have no memory of the Council discussing language — every man spoke in his own tongue.

Mr Shannon: It is good to see that the British-Irish Council is strengthening and encouraging east-west relations, and that is proving fruitful. The First Minister mentioned a focus on the misuse of drugs. I welcome that focus, because drugs, and alcohol, constitute the biggest scourge of the modern age.

However, I would like to take a different angle as far as my question is concerned. What consideration is being given to developing new work sectors through BIC?

The First Minister: The interim report examined current and potential work sectors. Nine new work streams were established initially. However, given the changes in society and the new challenges faced by member Administrations, there is a need to reassess the strategic direction of the work streams and to ensure that they reflect the priorities of the member Administrations and offer the greatest possible co-operation. We believe that that is the way forward.

Mr Elliott: I thank the First Minister for his statement. There is a quite a bit of detail about children's early-years provision. Were there any discussions concerning differences in legislation between, in particular, Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK as regards looked-after children? If so, has any provision been made for co-operation on such legislation?

The First Minister: Consideration was given to the matters that the honourable Member referred to, and they will be examined further. The report, when available, will point the way for the BIC in the matters that the Member has so wisely brought before the House today.

Mr A Maginness: I emphasise the importance of those meetings; it is vital that we build good, solid relations among all the peoples of these islands. I obviously welcome the good work that was done at the Council and the fact that the First Minister and his colleagues discussed a wide range of issues.

However, one point in particular that I wish to raise is the Scottish First Minister's proposal, which was mentioned in the First Minister's statement, that energy issues be developed as a new area of work. The development and expansion of nuclear power as an energy source in Britain has caused great concern for people living in Ireland, North and South. Given that, did the First Minister or any of his colleagues raise that issue? If not, will he guarantee the House that if it is raised in the future, he will express those concerns about nuclear power on behalf of the Assembly and the Executive?

The First Minister: The honourable Member has his views on the matter; however, nuclear power is something that is entirely for the British Government to deal with. It is not a matter for us, and were we to raise it, we would no doubt be told politely to mind our own business. The battle on that issue must be fought through the United Kingdom Parliament; it is not a matter on which the BIC will be prepared to venture an opinion, because many of its members have the same problems with nuclear power as those that Mr Maginness raised.

Many European politicians probably think in the same way as the honourable Member, which is that their respective countries should each be doing something different on the matter. Therefore, I can give the Member no comfort on that score. The battle will be fought, and no doubt those who prevail in Government will prevail, and we will probably see further developments on the matter.

However, I emphasise that everyone who is concerned about this issue should be interested in the safety of the people in the areas in which they live. We all have a responsibility for that, and from that we cannot wash our hands.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the First Minister for his statement, and, unlike David Ford, I welcome the fact that so many Executive Ministers attended the summit meeting. With that in mind, I congratulate the Executive. I also welcome the attendance at the meeting of Pat Carey, TD, who has responsibility in the Dáil for issues concerning drugs.

Problem drug use is difficult for families, and its associated complications have no social, economic or geographical borders, artificial or otherwise. Strategies to reduce the harmful impact that problem drug use can have on children are vital. Given that my Foyle constituency is located along the border corridor, what strategies are in place, particularly in the north-west, to deal with reducing the potential harm that problem drug use can cause to children?

The deputy First Minister informed the Chamber last week that the Northwest Gateway initiative needed to go through a step change. Perhaps that initiative and the Co-operation and Working Together (CAWT) scheme could be used as vehicles to implement strategies that would reduce the potential harm that the children of drug users in the north-west face.

The First Minister: As I said in my statement, the Council discussed the impact that problem drug use has on families and how we could take account of that impact in the development of drug and alcohol strategies. The Ministers agreed to include a renewed focus on the families of drug users in any future drug strategies, with a view to providing increased support to those families and to better harness their potential to facilitate life improvements for problem drug users. Therefore, we faced up to the matter.

However, with all member Administrations coming together to meet, the difficulty arises that, in such a broad group, they all want to get their tongue in. Therefore, representatives are unable to specify local problems. We must deal with issues in a wider capacity, so I cannot say how we might deal with specific, smaller matters that the bigger picture affects. However, those present at the summit faced up to the problems to which they needed to face up. If strategies are implemented and become reality, every part of the various countries and states that attended the summit — even the area that the honourable lady mentioned — will share in the benefits that accrue.

11.15 am

Mr Deputy Speaker: Several Members still wish to speak; therefore, I ask Members to keep their questions relatively short.

Mr Spratt: I, too, thank the First Minister for his statement on the British-Irish Council summit. What work is being undertaken to increase the level of east-west activity in order to put it on a par with North/South arrangements?

The First Minister: The North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) and the BIC now operate on a par. Since the establishment of the BIC, it has met on more than 200 occasions, including 10 times at summit level and 18 times at ministerial level. Member Administrations have a renewed interest in, and commitment to, the

BIC's work, which is reflected in its expanding work programme.

Considerable potential exists to develop and promote further the BIC's positive and practical relationships, and we look forward to further enhancing east-west arrangements through the strategic review. Therefore, I tell my honourable friend that member Administrations are interested in the work of the BIC, and we are seeking to bring our force to bear in our arguments on matters that concern us in order to benefit Northern Ireland.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Likewise, I thank the First Minister for his statement. One of the biggest scourges in all our communities throughout all the islands is cocaine use, not to mention cocaine abuse. Was the issue of cocaine use being perceived to be acceptable among the middle classes discussed at the BIC summit? If so, did any discussion take place on a strategy to combat the perceived acceptability of that drug?

The First Minister: All types of drug abuse were mentioned and considered. Those deliberations will be the subject of reports that will be presented at the next meeting at which those matters are discussed.

I am not in a position to say how the middle classes and the wealthy classes enjoy themselves or destroy themselves, so I shall have to leave that to the Member, but —

Mr Shannon: Do you belong to the wealthy classes, Willie? *[Laughter.]*

The First Minister: I did not mean it in that way. If Members twist what I say, I simply have to accept the twist and go on.

All that I can say to the honourable gentleman is that those are serious issues, especially for young people. We do not want a generation to grow up in Northern Ireland that is shackled with the follies of their younger days. We have a duty to provide guardianship in the crucial days that will determine the rest of their lives.

Mr Hamilton: I join in welcoming the First Minister's statement. He will remember how he fought hard to improve the British-Irish Council's role and to end its secondary status. Can he tell the Assembly what steps are being taken to ensure that those essential east-west linkages between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom are being enhanced?

The First Minister: We have very strong links with the other regions of the UK. The British-Irish Council is playing a unique and important role in further promoting and developing those links through fostering positive, practical relationships and by providing a forum for consultation and co-operation. Since its inception, the Council has undertaken an extensive programme of work, and more than 200

meetings have been held, including 10 at summit level and 18 at ministerial level.

Since May last year, there has been increased activity, with some 33 BIC meetings, including two summits and a ministerial environment meeting. I am pleased to note significant bilateral engagement among Ministers and at official level. The Scottish Government have agreed to host the next summit in September, and the Welsh Assembly will host the summit in early 2009. Therefore, we are certainly making progress.

Mr Beggs: I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their statement. They have indicated that the British-Irish Council will assess transport links between Administrations, in recognition of the economic importance of those.

Transport is led by the Northern Ireland Administration. Given that the next meeting of BIC will be hosted by the Scottish Executive, does the First Minister agree that that would be an opportune time to place a special focus on the road and rail links between Northern Ireland and Scotland — in particular, the improvements on the A8 Larne-to-Belfast road, the Larne-to-Belfast rail link, and, indeed, the links from Cairnryan, northward to Ayr and Glasgow, and eastwards to Carlisle?

The First Minister: I agree entirely that that is an important issue, and it is one that we will continue to address. Indeed, during a visit to Edinburgh recently, we had a lengthy discussion about transport. The Scottish people feel that a definite commitment is required to improve the roads that we use after leaving the ferry from Northern Ireland. They hope that those roads will be of such good order and availability that the entire experience of ferry travel will be improved, and people will be excited about driving on them.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad Aire as an ráiteas a thug sé dúinn anseo ar maidin. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí de — ainneoin na droch-chuimhne atá aige — an dtiocfadh leis mionneolas a thabhairt dúinn ar an dul chun cinn atá déanta i gcúrsaí mionteangacha agus teangacha neamhfhorleathana?

I, too, thank the First Minister for his statement. Despite his earlier bout of linguistic amnesia, could I ask him to detail the progress that he said has been made on minority and lesser-used languages? Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The First Minister: I have already covered that matter in the various statements that I have made today. The honourable Member is perhaps unhappy because all his needs have not been met. However, continual dripping wears away the stone — and he should keep at it. We are all frustrated at times when our brilliant suggestions are decried and rejected, but we must be patient.

I dare say that Rome was not built in a day, and that applies to the honourable Member's vision for what he hopes to build. Of course, some people may be busy tearing down the building while the Member is creating it.

Miss McIlveen: The First Minister mentioned that child protection was raised at the summit. Will he elaborate on those discussions and outline how progress will be made on that matter?

The First Minister: I am happy to do that. The Assembly held an important debate on child protection last October, and we raised the matter at the summit.

The deputy First Minister and I agree that children are our most important asset — they are our future, and we have a duty to protect them. We, therefore, believe that the review of the BIC provides us with an opportunity to consider the appropriateness of child protection as a new work area for the Council. We held a very useful discussion on that matter at the summit. The Council agreed that child protection is vital, and that it was essential to build on the arrangements that exist among the member Administrations.

We also raised the growing problem of suicide among young people, which I have mentioned previously. We discussed the significant increase in the number of suicides, and our concerns about the negative impact that some websites and Internet chat rooms could have on people at times of crisis in their lives.

The Council agreed that child protection was an important matter and that it was essential to build on the existing arrangements among Administrations and to ascertain how the issue could be further developed through enhanced collaboration and co-operation. The Council also agreed that, as part of the review, officials should consider the inclusion of child protection — including the growing problem of suicides among young people — in the BIC work programme.

I welcome the honourable lady's question, and I hope that she will be satisfied with that reply.

Outcome of Affordability Review

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice that the Minister for Social Development wishes to make a statement on the outcome of the affordability review.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I wish to outline to the Assembly how I intend to deliver a range of actions that I believe will herald the beginning of a new housing agenda in Northern Ireland. I believe that everyone should have the opportunity to live in a decent, warm and affordable home. There can be no more fundamental right than having a roof over one's head, and that is why I have made the alleviation of our housing crisis my foremost priority.

On my first day as Minister, I discovered that my Department had barely the resources to start 600 new houses this year, against a target of more than twice that. However, I have since secured an additional £70 million in the current year, and I am pleased to confirm that we are on track to start 1,500 homes this year. I have been given the money, and I am building the houses.

Inheriting an inadequate budget was one thing, but accepting one would have been quite another. The initial allocation for housing for the next three years in the draft Budget was not acceptable — that was fairly obvious. What was not so obvious, perhaps, was the real damage that would have been done to the social housing development programme if more resources had not been made available.

There were many people, some of whom are sitting in the Chamber, who told me to accept my lot and just get on with it. They failed to grasp that one cannot provide public housing without public money. I am thankful that — owing to my detailed analysis and the strength of the arguments that I made — I persuaded my Executive colleagues to increase the housing budget.

They recognise the substantial contribution that the housing programme makes to the construction sector and to the overall economy. I will leave it to others to determine whether an extra £205 million to tackle waiting lists, homelessness and affordability was worth fighting for. However, I do not think that that is such a bad return for my first nine months in office.

11.30 am

While trying to secure a better housing budget for the next three years, I used the time to assess the scale of the challenge. Today, there are more than 38,000 people on the waiting list; more than 20,000 people are in housing stress; more than 9,000 people are officially homeless; and average house prices are more than 10 times the average income. Those are staggering and unprecedented statistics, and that is why I sought radical and unprecedented solutions.

To deliver a new housing agenda, it was clear that I needed to deliver more innovative and imaginative solutions than ever before. I established an affordability review group to examine the recommendations arising from Sir John Semple's study into affordable housing. I brought in a panel of independent housing experts representative of all interests across the public, private and voluntary sectors to identify priorities. To complement that work, I asked Baroness Margaret Ford, former chairperson of English Partnerships, to review the financial and economic options for better delivery of social and affordable housing in Northern Ireland. That work is now complete, and I shall outline some of the measures that I am preparing to implement.

I have developed an implementation plan that identifies who, how and when each of the recommendations in the Semple Report will be advanced. Sir John Semple made 80 recommendations, and work on half of those will be under way — some even delivered — by April. I will bring those details to the Executive Committee for approval.

I am grateful to the expert panel for its insights and for its unanimous report, and I will act on some of its key recommendations. I am also grateful for the work of Baroness Ford, which includes some radical ideas for raising further capital against the social housing asset base. I look forward to advancing that work with the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Strategic Investment Board. I shall now address those issues in turn.

A starting point for the new housing agenda must be the construction of more homes. My final budget provides for the building of 1,500 homes in year 1, 1,750 in year 2 and 2,000 in year 3. Those figures represent a significant increase over previous years, and I hope to better them.

One of the key recommendations from the research is the introduction of a developer contribution. The Environment Minister and I intend to implement a policy to introduce a developer contribution to social and affordable housing. That contribution, which is a normal part of the planning process elsewhere on these islands, will require developers to provide social and affordable housing as a proportion of all new proposed housing developments. Under such an arrangement, it will also be possible to establish integrated developments so that social, affordable and private housing can be built seamlessly in the same development.

Last year alone, 2,000 homes were provided across Southern Ireland through a form of developer contribution. In time, we could secure many hundreds, if not thousands, of additional affordable homes through a similar contribution. I do not understand why such a contribution was not introduced under direct rule. I believe that that was a missed opportunity.

This is a significant proposal, and the detail of it will go out for consultation as a proposed addendum to Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 12. I expect the proposal to make a positive impact, and I am grateful to my colleague Arlene Foster for her support in introducing it as a priority.

The Housing Executive has produced an empty homes strategy, which identifies the number of public and private houses that are empty but that have the potential to be brought back into use. An action plan is being developed, through which 4,000 owners of empty dwellings will be contacted and encouraged — perhaps with the incentive of existing improvement grants — to make the dwellings available to new occupants. I have also lent my support to the Finance Minister's proposal to levy rates on empty houses. Together, we are using a carrot-and-stick approach, and that should result in the creation of more houses.

I am also engaged in the ministerial subgroup on rural planning. In the context of a revised PPS 14, I am negotiating a relaxation in the restrictions on social and affordable housing development in rural settlements. I am confident that we will soon be able to do more for those on the waiting lists who wish to live in rural communities.

Sky-high house prices mean that one of the greatest problems facing some people is getting on to the first rung of the housing ladder. That is why I want to enhance the successful co-ownership scheme. If the scheme is enhanced, more people will look to that form of home ownership as a realistic alternative to immediate outright purchase. Last year, record numbers of people were helped on to the housing ladder through the co-ownership scheme, and I want to build on that success. From April of this year, I will abolish the limits that restrict the purchase of homes through co-ownership, and I want to amend the scheme to allow people to enter it more easily.

I want to make it possible for people to avail themselves of co-ownership by buying 25% of the value of a property as opposed to the current minimum of 50%. Furthermore, I want them to find it easier to purchase additional shares in their homes, so I will reduce the minimum increment from 12.5% to 5%. I will ensure that new eligibility criteria are in place when the changes are introduced so that people will not overextend themselves financially.

I am also conscious that there is a need to support people who are striving to stay on the housing ladder. Last year, repossession orders were served on almost 1,000 people. I want to establish a mortgage-rescue scheme that will help those people, and I will have detailed proposals in place by the summer of this year.

I have also undertaken a review of the Housing Executive's house sales scheme. The scheme has

proved popular since it was introduced, and it has led to a greater mix of tenures in our housing estates — bringing about greater social and economic cohesion. However, in recent years, house sales have dropped as values have doubled. The appetite to buy remains high, but affordability is the obstacle. I want to create more pathways to home ownership. That is why I will extend the house sales scheme from 1 November this year to give all social-housing tenants the chance to own a share in their homes. I also hope to provide more social housing with the additional receipts delivered by that new initiative.

The future of housing lies in mixed tenure and in the provision of housing that will bring people together, not keep them apart. The Programme for Government was criticised for the absence of a commitment to a shared future. However, a shared future will be a central theme in all my endeavours in housing. In the education sector, many people want integration rather than segregation, and the same can be said in relation to housing. It is my intention to accommodate that desire.

I have visited the first shared future housing scheme at Carran Crescent in Enniskillen. It is well settled. Work on a second scheme, in Sion Mills, is under way, and good progress is being made on a number of other locations all over the North. It is also my intention to advance the shared future agenda in existing housing estates, as well as in the newbuild schemes.

Regrettably, shared future housing is sometimes presented as an alternative to delivering housing where it is most needed, and that is particularly pertinent in the numerous interface territories of North Belfast.

All that I can say is that my first preference, wherever possible, is for mixed-tenure shared future housing. However, above all, we must address instances of overwhelming need.

A full equality impact assessment will be undertaken for the Crumlin Road/Girdwood site, which offers considerable scope to ease housing pressures in that part of Belfast. I want shared future housing on that site. However, if that is not possible, I will allow building to proceed. I will not allow much-needed housing development to be vetoed by those who are motivated by territorial or sectarian considerations.

I also intend to incorporate creative, private-sector housing initiatives into shared future planning.

In an effort to get more for less, from April 2008, I will cut grants paid per dwelling to housing associations by 10%. My Department's research, and the advice offered by Baroness Ford, indicates that associations could absorb that cut by making better use of their assets and by introducing more private finance, which would mean more houses for the same public investment.

Next month, I will publish a new procurement strategy for housing associations, which will be able to drive down costs by creating larger procurement groups, and I expect savings of up to 10% to be delivered through that strategy. The new strategy will also introduce improved quality and innovation in design.

Sustainability is another theme of my proposals. We must aim not only to build more homes, but better homes, and I am committed to a significant investment in sustainable low-carbon-footprint housing. All new social houses built after April 2008 will be required to meet standards that, in effect, will mean that they will be 25% more energy efficient than those built just two years ago.

By the end of March 2008, the former Grosvenor Barracks in Enniskillen will become a major £40 million regeneration project, that will include a new housing development that will set new standards in sustainable house construction — in effect, it will be Northern Ireland's first ever eco-village — and I intend that it will be an exemplar for housing schemes in the North of Ireland.

In addition to developing an eco-village with social, affordable and market housing, I want the best possible use to be made of the most environmentally friendly materials. Therefore, the scheme will utilise solar energy and ground-source heat pumps and will recycle grey water. I want to learn economic lessons and replicate that project in other parts of the North. By reducing the overall cost of the scheme, we can demonstrate that it does not have to cost the earth to save the earth.

I will promote sustainability in the private sector by making £40 million available next year for private-sector grants. In addition, I intend to increase significantly the resources available to carry out disabled-living adaptations.

Improving sustainability and energy efficiency in the private and social sectors remains a key objective in our ongoing battle against fuel poverty. In the past year alone, by directly improving energy efficiency in homes, my Department helped 17,000 families to be warmer, and the success of fuel-poverty interventions can be vouched for by the 200,000 people who are not in fuel poverty as a result of such intervention.

In order to derive the maximum possible benefits from certain interventions, I will increase my Department's fuel-poverty spending from April and introduce practical reforms to the warm homes scheme.

I have already emphasised the necessity for action in areas with the greatest housing need, and there is a community in Belfast that is looking to me to end its housing misery. Nobody would deny that some housing in the Village area is simply not fit for purpose. When I visited that area, I saw how poor

some of that accommodation was, and I gained a sense of how, under direct rule, people were strung along.

11.45 am

I assured them that I would act, and now, three weeks after getting my budget, I am delighted to announce that I have allocated a new amount of £7 million so that work can start in the Village immediately. That investment represents the beginning of a long-term project that will lead to the revitalisation of the area and, it is to be hoped, of the community itself. The initial vesting will be authorised in the next few days, and the declaration of the Village as an urban renewal area — a decision that will kick-start the full redevelopment process — will be formalised in March. That will trigger an investment of around £100 million for the area.

Under the heading of new approaches, I have introduced efficiencies into existing programmes, as well as a range of new initiatives that will allow me to deliver more houses for less money. I will also bring surplus land on to the market for sale this year, and I am pleased to have been given an assurance that housing will be a priority area for redistributing receipts from that course of action. My Department will engage intensively with the private sector and the development community in order to advance new structures and deals that can deliver the maximum housing for the least outlay of scarce public capital. I am confident that that innovative and flexible approach — if we pursue it with vigour — can produce tremendous results in the shape of additional housing. To that end, I will examine critically the structures and capacity for delivery in my Department. I have already asked the Strategic Investment Board for its support in programme delivery.

My Department has already made a start, and it will continue to deliver more social housing. I will propose radical changes and initiatives in order to deliver a substantial number of affordable homes. In addition, we recognise that it is essential to help more people on to the housing ladder and to ensure that they stay there. The Department's priority will be to meet pressing housing need first, but that will not preclude the delivery of shared future housing for the many people who want it.

We will deliver more sustainable and energy efficient homes, including our first eco-village. We will end the long-term neglect of the Village area of south Belfast. Assets will be better leveraged, the resourcefulness of the private sector will be harnessed, and we will create the structures for delivery.

In short, we have created a radical and energetic agenda for housing, the like of which has not been seen for a generation. It has my total commitment: by working together on that agenda we can prove, once and for all, that devolution is infinitely better for our people.

Coming from a party that has a proud record in housing reform, I am pleased to commend that agenda to the Assembly.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Many Members wish to put questions to the Minister. If Members keep their questions brief, and if the Minister keeps her answers to the point, we should be able to give most Members who wish to an opportunity to ask a question.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): I welcome the Minister's statement, and I thank her for providing an advance copy. The Committee for Social Development has been holding its breath for some time for the Minister's response to Sir John Semple's recommendations, and, on the face of it, it would appear to have been well worth the wait. The Minister has provided details of a number of actions that I hope will go a long way towards addressing the affordable housing crisis.

The Minister's statement has injected a new sense of enthusiasm into the debate on affordable housing. There has been some frustration since the publication of the Semple Report. Many thought that there was no clear path to get us out of the affordable housing crisis and that things were not moving fast enough.

In particular, the Committee for Social Development welcomes the short-, medium- and long-term targets that have been set for the implementation of Sir John Semple's recommendations. It is important to have a clearly defined programme of actions and targets, and the Committee hopes that that will be coupled with robust monitoring and publicising of any progress that is made.

Committee members, and other Assembly Members, who deal daily with constituents who face some form of housing difficulties, believe that it is important that immediate improvements are made in the housing situation. However, it is equally important that the foundations are laid for a healthy, sustainable and affordable housing market for the future.

The Minister has said on many occasions that housing is a priority. However, I want her to tell the House what the priorities are within that general aim. Short-, medium- and long-term targets do not necessarily reflect priority. Will the Minister, therefore, clarify her priority actions for tackling the housing crisis?

Secondly, I would like the Minister to clarify what particular actions she sees as laying the foundations for improved access to affordable housing in the many years ahead.

Ms Ritchie: I thank Mr Hilditch for his very kind and hospitable words, and I welcome ongoing engagement with the Social Development Committee on this issue. When I first took office in May last year,

I said that housing would be my number-one priority as there was an identified housing need throughout Northern Ireland.

The Member mentioned the various priorities and actions. I want to increase the number of houses and the supply of social and affordable housing through addressing the issues of developer contributions, land assets, empty homes, housing association finance and procurement. That will also involve relaxing the limits for co-ownership programmes and considering a mortgage-relief scheme, sustainability issues, the creation of an eco-village, shared future arrangements, mixed-tenure options and fuel poverty. Thus, the whole ambit is important. I need the support of the Executive, the Committee, the Assembly and the wider housing family to be able to deliver on the proposals.

I can assure the House that structures will be put in place to ensure delivery because we are now at the delivery stage, and the people of Northern Ireland expect and deserve the best quality housing. I want to have the ability to deliver such housing.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement, and I welcome its contents. Given the importance that has been attached to the review, many people eagerly await the production of a strategy that will give clear signals to the wider public that the housing nightmare will be tackled seriously.

With that in mind, will the Minister tell us when we can expect the first houses to be built under the proposals for a developer's contribution? Will that be next month, next year or some years down the line? Will she ensure that developers do not use the intervening period to apply for planning permission to pre-empt the introduction of article 40 agreements. Have housing associations been advised to buy off-the-shelf houses rather than opting for newbuild to enhance the numbers for this year's programme, and does she see that approach as offering value for money?

The implementation plan, which is based on recommendations from the Semple Report, states that the targets for the Titanic Quarter should be set at 3,500 units of affordable housing, with 15% to 20% being social housing. Will the Minister explain her definition of an affordable house? Will she further tell the House if the same will apply to the Sirocco Works development in east Belfast?

Will the Minister also tell the House —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member get to the point?

Mr F McCann: They are all questions, Mr Deputy Speaker. You gave leeway to the Minister when she was answering questions, and to the Deputy Chairperson.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I must give leeway to the Chairperson or the Deputy Chairperson of a Committee. I asked Members to be brief —

Mr F McCann: What I am saying —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, excuse me. I have in front of me a long list of Members who wish to speak, and I really want to give all Members an opportunity to ask questions.

Mr F McCann: Will the Minister also tell the House whether she has had a meeting with the construction industry to ask what part it will play in the creation of an affordable housing sector and in the supply of high-quality social housing? I am drawing my remarks to a conclusion.

Some Members: Question.

Mr F McCann: Will the Minister also tell us whether land under the ownership of her Department in Belfast city centre and other cities and towns will be used for affordable housing schemes on a mixed-tenure basis, and will she guarantee that any developments have the infrastructure to allow communities —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr McCann, please, you must really bring your remarks to a close.

Minister, you may answer all the questions posed by Mr McCann, or you may select some questions to answer.

Ms Ritchie: I am glad that Mr McCann has a lot more to say today than simply telling me to stop whingeing and accept my lot, as he said to me in the Chamber in October and November of last year.

[Laughter.]

Mr F McCann: As a member of —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McCann, are you making a point of order?

Mr F McCann: Yes. As a member of the Social Development Committee, I am quite entitled to comment on the statement.

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

Mr F McCann: If I think that the Minister is —

Mr Durkan: Mr Deputy Speaker, Standing Orders provide that no points of order should be made during a ministerial statement or during questions to the Minister on that statement.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank Mr Durkan for that information. The Minister may continue.

Ms Ritchie: Mr McCann asked a long series of questions, the answers to all of which were covered in my statement. When I became Minister for Social Development, I said that the provision of social and affordable housing was my main priority. That was

because I realised that there was an identified need for social and affordable housing, with 38,000 people on the housing list, 50% of whom were in housing stress, and a large number of whom were homeless. Many such people could not afford to get on to the first rung of the property ladder.

At that stage, I was determined to undertake research and analysis and to establish the evidence that would enable me to implement measures to kick-start a new housing agenda. That is the basis for today's statement.

Minister Foster and I have been working since before January of this year on the issue of developer contributions. It is worth noting that the responsibility for PPS 12 was transferred from Minister Murphy to Minister Foster only in January of this year.

I will ensure that delivery is now part of my vocabulary and part of my action. Indeed, that should be part of everyone's actions. I want to address housing need wherever it exists throughout Northern Ireland, irrespective of location.

Mr F McCann: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must resume his seat.

Mr F McCann: The Minister did not answer any of my questions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Points of order cannot be taken during questions to the Minister.

Mr F McCann: You took a point of order from your party leader.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I took a point of information. I am sorry that you have referred to a party leader. I am chairing this sitting in an impartial capacity. There is a long list of Members who wish to ask questions. Without apology, I ask Members to be brief when asking questions.

Mr Cobain: I notice that you said that before I rose to speak.

I thank the Minister for all her hard work on this issue and for her statement. I welcome some of the new and innovative measures that she outlined in her statement. However, I am cautious about getting too optimistic about the housing difficulties being solved. The deficit in social housing is so great that what was outlined in today's statement should be considered as only a first step.

Developer contributions should be welcomed. Some 80,000 homes were built last year in the Irish Republic, 2,000 of which came from developer contributions, which represented a little over 2%. If the equivalent figure is applied to the targets that have been set for Northern Ireland, that would equate to developers

contributing just over 100 homes, which is not a tremendous number.

The Minister specifically mentioned North Belfast, and the issue of a shared future. As an Assembly Member for that area, I am aware that a shared future can grow organically — I welcome and support that. However, any attempt to enforce integration through housing in North Belfast will damage community relations in that area in the long term.

In a recent newspaper interview, the Minister of Finance and Personnel said that the 5,250 new homes that were announced by the Minister were in addition to the 10,000 new homes that were announced in the Programme for Government. Will the Minister comment on that statement?

Ms Ritchie: I thank Mr Cobain for his kind words. The 5,250 new houses will be built during the three years of the comprehensive spending review. The 10,000 new homes that were referred to in the Programme for Government will be built over the next five years. That is my intention, and, if at all possible, I am determined to better that.

I have taken on board and listened to what Mr Cobain said about North Belfast and about the particular problems of that area.

12.00 noon

I am anxious to ensure that there will be equality in all opportunities offered on the Girdwood site, such as social and affordable housing, recreation and jobs, because I simply want people to be able to live, work and socialise together. I know that Mr Cobain agrees with me on that issue.

Mr Cobain asked me about developer contributions. I have been to London and Dublin — and I know that Minister Foster has been to Poundbury — to see at first hand good examples of developer-contribution housing schemes being implemented. In London, I visited seamless housing schemes in Tower Hamlets, Shepherd's Bush and Greenwich. In Dublin I visited a major regeneration scheme that is under way at Ballymun, Finglas and Dublin Docklands. In all of those cases, no one would be able to identify the houses that are in full ownership, those that are socially rented and those that come under the shared equity scheme. I commend all of them as places for Members to visit.

I take on board Mr Cobain's comments on integration. Everything will work out, and I think that I have the support that I need from every Member to deliver the housing programme. That programme will ensure the provision of houses to enable people to access the most cherished thing in their lives — a roof over their heads.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before calling Alban Maginness, I remind Members and the Minister to be concise and stick to the point.

Mr A Maginness: I will be as succinct as possible. I welcome the commitment to meeting housing need in north Belfast, particularly at the Girdwood site, which should be a shared future site. The Minister's proposals are innovative, creative and have the capacity to transform the housing market in Northern Ireland.

When will the Minister be in a position to provide details on her proposal to allow existing tenants in Housing Executive or housing association properties to purchase a share of their homes, thereby becoming co-owners of those homes?

Ms Ritchie: I thank my colleague Mr Maginness for his kind words. I want that co-ownership scheme to be implemented by November 2008.

Ms Lo: I warmly congratulate the Minister on introducing the housing agenda. The Alliance Party is particularly pleased by her commitment to making a shared future the central theme of her endeavours to meet housing need.

I am delighted by the Minister's commitment to promoting work in the Village. Previous Ministers repeatedly promised to bring work to the area, and I am pleased that there is now a timetable for work to begin.

Last week, I met representatives from the Housing Rights Service, who were extremely concerned about the level of repossession, to which the Minister's statement referred. They also told me that firms are springing up and are offering to buy homes from people who face the difficulties associated with repossession. I want to hear more about the statutory mortgage-rescue scheme that is mentioned in the Minister's statement.

Ms Ritchie: I thank Ms Lo for her encouraging comments. I am aware of the number of repossessions last year, all of which are due to the lack of affordable housing. My Executive colleagues and I want to tackle the issue of affordability, and I will introduce proposals later this year for a mortgage rescue scheme. I understand that a no-day-named motion is due to be debated in the Assembly, which reflects that a wide section of the House is concerned about repossession.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her statement. I am pleased that she gained the Finance Minister's support during the Budget discussions and secured an extra £205 million for her departmental budget.

I particularly welcome the Minister's statement that she has looked for radical and unprecedented solutions. I ask her to consider a fast-track method for delivering housing, whereby houses that have already been built be put on the market for sale. Will she consider purchasing such houses for public-sector use?

Ms Ritchie: I thank Mr Newton for his questions. I thank the Finance Minister for listening to the reasoned representations that I made to him over a considerable period, which resulted in a substantial increase in my budgetary allocation.

I take Mr Newton's comments on board. I must have further discussions with Minister Foster about planning issues to ensure that there are fast-tracked planning applications for many housing developments, which will add to the supply of houses. I will have Mr Newton's suggestion investigated, and I shall respond to him in writing.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome her commitment to the regeneration of the Village area of Belfast. As she is aware, my colleague Alex Maskey has been working with the local community in the Village to see that that area is regenerated.

Does the Minister intend to extend the role of the private-rented sector in the provision of social housing? Can she confirm that the resolution of the Assembly on the mandatory registration of private landlords, which called on her to draw up a policy on the issue, is not on her agenda for the foreseeable future? How will the introduction of the local housing allowance, which will — in many cases — reduce housing benefit paid to claimants, impact on the ability of tenants to pay the exorbitant rents in that sector?

Ms Ritchie: The local housing allowance was discussed at last week's meeting of the Social Development Committee, of which Mr Brady is a member. At that meeting, I said that I was happy to return to the Committee to discuss that issue, and that I understood the Committee's concern about potential winners and losers. I said that I was receptive to any ideas that Committee members might have about resolving that issue, and my officials and I are exploring all the options. Members are aware that parity is also an issue, and, if matters change, there will be some implications for my budget.

I have asked my officials to explore the issue of mandatory registration for landlords, and I have not come to any formal view.

Members will recall that my predecessor, Minister Hanson, introduced The Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, which dealt with the private-rented sector. That Order creates a direct association between houses of multiple occupation (HMO), and the environmental-health departments of city, district and borough councils. I have asked my officials to assess the implications of that Order and how well it is working after nearly a year in operation. I await that assessment before coming to a formal view. I commend my new agenda, which is aimed at kick-

starting the housing sector and delivering houses for people in need.

Miss McIlveen: Does the Minister acknowledge that the regeneration of the Crumlin Road jail and the Girdwood site can proceed only with cross-community support? Does she agree that the concern in unionist communities of North Belfast about housing on that site is not based on sectarianism, but is influenced by the sectarian ethnic cleansing carried out by republicans in the Torrens area, where vulnerable Protestant families were driven from their homes? Can she confirm that she cannot proceed without the support of other Ministers and the Executive?

Ms Ritchie: I have given considerable thought to the master plan for the Girdwood and Crumlin Road sites. I launched the consultation process for that master plan on 16 October last year, and the consultation period closed around 22 January this year. I have received almost 800 responses to the consultation. After taking into consideration a wide range of views throughout North Belfast, and after listening to the Adjournment debate secured by my colleague Mr Maginness yesterday, to which some of the Member's party colleagues contributed, I am convinced that there is a need for shared, equal housing on the Girdwood site. Everyone who contributed to yesterday's debate told me that they wanted to see housing in the context of a shared future.

I will have to introduce a paper to the Executive on the future of the Girdwood and Crumlin Road sites. That is a cross-cutting issue. I have already said that I will do that, and I hope to introduce that paper in the not-too-distant future.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank the Minister for the personal interest that she has shown, particularly in the Village area of South Belfast — the largest concentration of unfit housing anywhere in Northern Ireland. I welcome her announcement of £7 million to begin the long-term project. Had she accepted the draft Budget, as many people urged, that announcement could never have been made. I also welcome the authorisation of the initial investment, the declaration of the urban renewal areas, and her remarks that trigger a £100 million process. That is music to the ears of the Greater Village Regeneration Trust, the people who live in that area and those of us who have battled on that issue for many years.

How does the Minister see the process moving forward? I represent an impatient community, and it wants to see houses being built. What is the process for the delivery of that £100 million redevelopment?

Ms Ritchie: I thank Mr McGimpsey for his kind words. At his invitation, I visited the Village area with him and the Member of Parliament for South Belfast, Dr McDonnell, on 14 June 2007. I have had an

opportunity to meet members of the Greater Village Regeneration Trust, along with a section of the local community and many other people, over the last few months. I was struck by the housing conditions that I witnessed in that area, and I wanted to do something to alleviate the problems that those people have suffered.

As a result of my decision today, I have instructed my officials to work on the Village area as a priority. I have also urged the Housing Executive to ensure that it deals with that issue not only at its board meeting tomorrow, but at its subsequent board meeting in March. That board meeting will deal with two separate papers on the Village area.

My Department and the Housing Executive are charged with the need to address housing conditions in that area, and we will work collectively. We also want to work with Mr McGimpsey and the other representatives for South Belfast to kick-start the building of new houses and a new housing and regeneration agenda for the Village area that will deliver a better sense of health, well-being and better housing, and will create a series of opportunities for current and future generations.

12.15 pm

Mr Burns: Will the Minister gift many sites to local communities as she rolls out her housing agenda?

Ms Ritchie: Consultation with local communities will be paramount in any housing or regeneration development that I will undertake. Housing and regeneration are interlinked, because they deliver a better sense of health and well-being. I do not see how a proposed development can be successful without the support and buy-in of local communities such as those in the Village or North Belfast. In addition, any significant development will be subject to full equality proofing, and an equality impact assessment will be necessary.

Having said all that, I know that it is natural that many communities would wish to take control of some available sites for community purposes. However, I must accept that, in a time of inflated land prices, such sites are valuable assets, and, as a rule, I cannot pass them on to communities for community use.

When a suitable site becomes available, my first instinct will be to build social and affordable housing on it. Although most building will be done by housing associations through the Housing Executive's social housing development programme, I will be seeking mixed-tenure developments and more involvement from the private sector; private-sector involvement is crucial. I seek partnership among the Housing Executive — as the strategic housing authority — the housing associations, my Department and the private sector to deliver a new housing future for the people of Northern Ireland and for future generations.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. I am delighted that we are discussing social and affordable housing and North Belfast less than 24 hours after a debate in the House on housing need in that area. I am delighted that some of our colleagues in other parties have recognised the historical inequalities in housing in North Belfast.

Will the Minister assure the House that, given that an equality impact assessment was not conducted before Christmas, it will be carried out now on the regeneration of North Belfast and the housing needs of the people who live there, and that it will reflect the needs of those on the housing waiting list? Will she also assure the House that integrated housing schemes will be developed only where demand exists and that integrated housing will not be imposed on people as their only option for attaining a home? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ritchie: I gave a detailed response yesterday to the issue of housing in North Belfast. I wish to address housing on the basis of need. There is significant housing need throughout Northern Ireland. I am well aware of the housing inequalities in North Belfast and of the need to continue to address the regeneration and housing requirements of that area.

I honestly believe that, given the bedding down of the political institutions and current, continuing peace and stability, we are all required to contribute to that to ensure that people feel safe in their own environments. It is incumbent on us all to move towards a situation where people can live, work and socialise together, because that is the future for everyone. It is not a matter of imposition; it is a matter of simply ensuring, through time, that we can all live in partnership. If we can share power here, there is nothing to stop us encouraging people to live in partnership in all our communities.

Mr Craig: I warmly welcome some of the Minister's comments. With regard to the contribution of private developers, is she aware that in some areas, including my constituency, much land banking has taken place in the past few years, and there are many planning applications in the system? The impact of the contribution of private developers could take more than five years to impact on social housing provision in such areas.

Will the Minister take that on board and consider more proactively purchasing land in areas where those circumstances have applied?

I welcome the fact that she will consider a mortgage rescue scheme. This is the only area in the UK where a not-for-profit scheme does not exist, and that has a significant impact on the housing market, to the detriment of the public purse.

Will the Minister also examine the warm homes scheme and perhaps market more proactively renewable energy sources? At present, the choice is between oil-fired or gas-fired central heating, but renewable sources, such as woodchip boilers, are available.

Ms Ritchie: I thank Mr Craig for his questions, and I know that he always takes an interest in those matters in the Social Development Committee. I take on board what he says about land banking. The Minister of Finance and Personnel's proposals on empty homes and house banking will take account of that.

Both Minister Foster and I are aware of the impact of private-developer contributions. We both want to ensure that those proposals are advanced as quickly as possible in order to ensure an increase in the supply of social and affordable housing in Northern Ireland.

Mr Craig has tabled a motion on the no-day-named list about a mortgage-relief scheme. We all know of people who have had their houses repossessed. It boils down to affordability: we want to help people who are in trouble because our society is caring, and I would like to think that all Members of the Assembly are caring.

I want to explore all the available options to ensure that people do not find themselves suffering as a result of cold either this winter or in future winters. I need the support of all my Executive colleagues to explore those options. I will therefore consider any scheme that any Members propose to me.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. I commend her and her Executive colleagues for the work that has been done. As the Minister said in her statement:

"I have been given the money, and I am building the towns."

Therefore, more than one Minister is to be commended.

Mr McCann asked about developer contributions. The Minister replied that the answer to that is in the statement. However, I cannot see in the statement when the strategy will be implemented. The advisory panel that worked on the scheme said that a medium- to long-term delivery mechanism would be implemented. It also said that a consultation will be held on PPS 12 and that an implementation-skills group will be set up.

I ask the Minister whether she can provide the House with a time frame. Is it a medium- to long-term solution? In her response to Mr Craig, I believe that she mentioned five years. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ritchie: Both Minister Foster and I want to introduce developer contributions. I said about 20 minutes ago that Minister Foster received PPS 12 from Minister Murphy only in January this year. Minister Foster would have been able to advance those plans had it not been for the considerable delay in the

transfer of that particular planning policy statement. We will make proposals to introduce developer contributions later this year, and I hope that that will happen sooner rather than later.

Every Member wants the supply of social and affordable housing to be increased. My solution is simple: let us all get on the bandwagon now and address the affordability issue, alleviate the housing crisis and ensure that everyone has access to a roof over their head, which is the most fundamental requirement for daily living.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her statement. Her interest and enthusiasm are clear, and I welcome that. The Minister mentioned that she has been in discussions about PPS 12 with Arlene Foster, who is an equally enthusiastic Minister. Is there a timescale for the completion of those discussions?

What bodies will be involved in the mortgage rescue scheme: the benefit offices, the Department or the co-ownership schemes?

The Minister said that she will make an extra £40 million available for private-sector grants to promote eco-friendly housing. I am concerned about slowness in the paying out of those grants. Some people have said that they are out of pocket for a long time before the grants are paid. Along with Enniskillen, a good eco-friendly scheme is coming to Newtownards in the Strangford constituency — I never fail to mention Strangford, if possible.

Ms Ritchie: Mr Shannon never fails to mention his constituency of Strangford. Some weeks ago, I visited that constituency at his kind invitation. I examined various housing schemes, including Scrabo, which I previously designated as an area of risk. He mentioned improvement grants; those are important to people who wish to rehabilitate and improve their properties. I want to have further discussions with the Housing Executive to ensure that — all things being equal, and all the information being available — those grants can be expedited, because people need them to achieve a better standard of housing.

I heard comments from the Benches behind me to the effect that I did not answer an earlier question on developer contributions. Along with Minister Foster, I am doing everything that I can to ensure that developer contributions will be introduced as quickly as possible. That includes putting out a scheme for consultation, and I will also ensure that the resources and staff will be available in my Department to deliver the introduction of developer contributions. We want to work with developers; I have had various discussions with the chief executive of the Construction Employers Federation, who is in the Public Gallery today to listen to the debate. We all want to work together to deliver the best possible housing agenda for all citizens across

Northern Ireland. It is particularly important to deliver that for people who are in housing need, people who have been on the waiting list for a long time, people who are homeless and, above all, people who have been trying to reach the first rung of the property ladder.

Mr Durkan: When Mr Shannon was asking the previous question, I was waiting to hear the Ulster Scots for “eco-village” and “sustainable living”. Perhaps we will be educated about that on another day.

I commend the Minister on her positive and comprehensive statement, which entirely vindicates her success in the Budget round. Her strategy is articulate and touches on issues of sustainable living, a shared future, fuel poverty and the complicated issues of developer contributions.

Is the Minister confident that the existing delivery structures that are available to her Department are adequate for the strategy? What other means will she consider to ensure that she, the House and the Social Development Committee are in a position to track and back delivery of the strategy? Will the strategy be able to overcome delivery black spots when they arise, whether through developer resistance, difficulties that housing associations may have with new procurement issues, or variations in market conditions?

Ms Ritchie: I thank Mr Durkan for his question, which has hit on the nub of the issue. The strategy is entirely concerned with delivery. I have had discussions with my senior housing officials, the Strategic Investment Board and the Housing Executive about the principal matter of delivery.

That is why, as I have said, I will be looking critically at the structures and capacity for delivery in my Department, including staff resources, and I have asked the Strategic Investment Board for its support in the programme’s delivery.

I have instructed my officials to provide a week-by-week report on the programme’s implementation to ensure that we hit all the targets. I assure all Members of this House that I am determined to leave no stone unturned to ensure that delivery is the top priority, that structures are in place to make sure that it happens and that there are houses to live in for those in urgent need.

12.30 pm

Mr Simpson: I welcome the Minister’s statement; however, in the Portadown area of my constituency, there are 761 applicants on the waiting list, approximately 750 between Lurgan and Central areas, and more than 800 in the Banbridge area.

Will the Minister define how her Department will identify the areas in which affordable housing will be built?

Ms Ritchie: I thank Mr Simpson for his kind words and for his pertinent question. Everything concerning the location of future social and affordable housing will be done on the basis of need, a matter that all of us in this House want to address. The direct rule Administration took their eye off the ball as regards the much-needed provision of social and affordable housing. This House wants to deal with that issue and is equipped to do so. As the Minister, I very much want that.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the Minister’s statement and the comments on delivery. In that context, will the Minister explain whether her statement can address the massive social housing need in Derry, where, currently, 2,300 people are on the waiting list?

Does the Minister have any plans to intervene to address the benefit gap? Tenants who are unable to secure social housing are forced to go to private landlords, who charge rent above and beyond the amount those people receive in housing benefits, again forcing tenants into severe poverty.

Ms Ritchie: I thank Ms Anderson for her question. To put it simply, I want the capacity, ability and structures in place to build an increasing supply of social and affordable housing so that no one will be forced into the hands of private landlords or left with that as the only option. We want to build more and better houses for allocation on the basis of need.

Mr Spratt: I, too, very much welcome the Minister’s statement, particularly concerning the Village area. She has done much work since taking office, after many false promises from direct rule Ministers, and I congratulate her.

I welcome the announcement of an initial £7 million, with a continuing programme of £100 million. I have previously made the point in the House that there are over 400 vacant properties in the Village, and it is important that we do not get into a situation where there are logjams along the way. Will the Minister ensure that her officials will consult fully with the entire Village community — including homeowners — and ensure that the rolling-out of the programme will be continuous, with no hold-ups?

Ms Ritchie: Mr Spratt is an MLA for South Belfast, so I am well aware of his concerns about the Village area. He has spoken to me on several occasions about the matter, and has tabled certain questions, to which I have supplied answers. I want, and have instructed, my officials to work closely with the Housing Executive and all stakeholders in the area to ensure the delivery of a good housing-regeneration programme that improves the lives of all who live there. When I visited the area, I saw the number of empty properties and the level of dereliction. I want to address the issue urgently, and that is why I have made my announcement today.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement and pay tribute to all her endeavours. I also pay tribute to the Executive and the Committee for Social Development, including Fra. [Laughter.] Social and affordable housing is a priority for all in the House. We all agree with the Minister and are behind her.

I also welcome the eco-village concept. A need to provide quality sustainable housing exists. I have raised the issue of the sustainability of her programme with the Minister a number of times. Can she outline what discussions she has had with the Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, on infrastructure that will ensure social inclusion, including rural public transport and adequate public transport to services? Does she agree that we need to build quality housing and communities, not the huge estates of the past?

Ms Ritchie: I welcome Mr Clarke's Damascene conversion. He was one of the people who said that I was whingeing and could have accepted my lot. In various newspapers throughout South Down, he criticised me for being a little bit too indulgent. Notwithstanding that, we welcome latter-day conversions on the matter.

I am fully aware of the Member's knowledge of, and interest in, eco-villages and zero-carbon housing. We will all be working towards a more sustainable future for housing. I will discuss with all my Executive colleagues the proper infrastructure that is required to deliver the best possible housing programme in Northern Ireland. I am sure that they will want to discuss their own infrastructure issues with me.

Mr O'Loan: I congratulate the Minister on her statement. Everyone will welcome the many practical measures to deal with the housing crisis.

I welcome her comments on a shared future. Can she provide any more detail on her plans to create shared-future mixed-community housing developments? Does she agree that achieving a shared future in housing is not something that can be done in isolation? It will require concerted action across all Departments. Does she further agree that that places a big responsibility on all in the Assembly? That includes when it comes to making requests to hold events in the Building.

Ms Ritchie: I fully agree with Mr O'Loan about a shared future. It does not simply mean living in a shared future on a housing estate but a shared future in all our actions, works and representations. I very much like the Carran Crescent housing scheme in Enniskillen, which I visited in December. Shared-future schemes will be coming on stream in Loughbrickland and Sion Mills. There are proposals for such schemes in Ballygowan, Banbridge, Rasharkin, Derry and Magherafelt.

I am also interested in the need for more integration in existing housing estates. The Member may already know that the Housing Executive is pursuing about 30

schemes for integrated housing, with the help of funding from the International Fund for Ireland.

It is a building bridges programme, which all Members should subscribe to and work towards. With the bedding down of the political institutions, we want to achieve a better shared future for everyone on the island.

Mr Storey: I welcome the Minister's statement, but I wish to ensure that there is some clarity and accuracy. The Minister was pleased to confirm that her Department was on track to start building 1,500 new homes this year. She said:

"I have been given the money, and I am building the houses."

However, she got that money, with no thanks, or help, from her party colleagues, as they abandoned her and voted against the Budget. Therefore, on a point of accuracy, the Minister voted with us through —

Dr McDonnell: Is this torrent of abuse in order?

Mr Storey: I am making a point about accuracy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr McDonnell, please resume your seat. Mr Storey, I am sure that you were in the Chamber when I said that questions should be brief and to the point so that we could get through the list of Members who wish to speak.

Mr Storey: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I would not want the day to pass without our saying something accurate. I particularly welcome the Minister's attempt to bring clarity and detail to her announcement — the Minister of Education, who is absent, would learn a lesson from that exercise. Therefore, I commend the Minister on that point. Will she assure me that areas in my constituency of North Antrim, such as Ballymena, Ballymoney and Ballycastle, will benefit as a result?

Methods of identifying areas of need should not miss the pockets of deprivation that may be hidden. Such areas have been missed in the past, because they are among areas of affluence. The issue is serious, and the Minister is well aware of that. She visited Dunclug, and I welcome her continued efforts to ensure that that project gets off the ground. Will she also give me some indication —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member please come to the question?

Mr Storey: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will the Minister give me some indication of how many off-the-shelf properties will be acquired in an attempt to achieve the targets that she is seeking for the incoming year?

Ms Ritchie: In spite of the barbed comments from Mr Storey —

Dr McDonnell: They were nasty comments.

Ms Ritchie: I would call them barbed comments.

I have always said that housing is my number-one priority, and I want to deliver the best quality housing for people in need across Northern Ireland. Last month, the board of the Housing Executive approved a multi-million pound environmental improvement scheme for Dunclog, which I hope will deliver a better environment and a better way of life for residents. In fact, I met Mr Storey, along with Mr O'Loan and Mr McKay, on a couple of occasions to discuss the pressing problems in Dunclog. I visited the area in September 2007 and saw at first hand the levels of dereliction that we all wish to address.

Robin Newton and Fra McCann talked about buying off-the-shelf houses, rather than building them, and I think that is what Mr Storey was referring to. I want housing associations to build new houses, rather than buy them off the shelf. It is 30% more expensive to buy homes rather than to build them. There may be some short-term gain in buying already built houses, but the long-term costs make building new houses cheaper than buying homes already built.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister said that there will be a cut of 10% per dwelling paid to housing associations. How much additional money will that provide to our Department every year?

Ms Ritchie: I thank Ms McCann for her question, which referred to a 10% reduction in the grant to housing associations.

That reduction will provide me with a significant resource that I would not otherwise have had. I hope that that will be invested in the social housing development programme in order to build houses for those who are in need.

12.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr William McCrea to speak, and I ask him to be brief, because we are coming towards the end of our time for this item of business.

Dr W McCrea: I think that only six minutes remain for this item of business, so I will make my question short.

I welcome the Minister's statement. Some areas and constituencies in the Province are regarded as affluent. However, there are areas of deprivation in every constituency; for instance, there is a need for social housing in Ballyclare. In my constituency of South Antrim, we are trying to cope with constituents' daily applications and enquiries about housing. However, the houses are not available for my constituents, regardless of whether they are being sought in Antrim or Newtownabbey. Although I welcome the Minister's statement, will she do all that she can to generate a greater number of social houses for those areas?

Ms Ritchie: I thank Dr McCrea for his question. He and I met about five or six weeks ago to discuss the

pressing housing issues in Newtownabbey and Ballyclare. I will take those matters on board, and I will talk to the Housing Executive.

I know that this item of business is nearing conclusion, but I remind the House that it is my earnest desire to have the funding available to build the required houses in areas of need. I hear rumblings about people not understanding the housing issue or not knowing what they are talking about. There is one thing, however, about which we are all absolutely sure: there is an identified housing need across Northern Ireland, irrespective of geographical location or whether an area is urban or rural. The need for housing was neglected by the direct rule Administration, and my officials and I — as well as the Executive, the wider housing constituency and the Assembly — want to address that need. That means that we have to increase the supply of social and affordable housing.

I have received the funding to provide 1,500 houses this year, 1,750 next year and 2,000 in the third year. If I receive the funding to better that, I want to be able to build even more houses. I have no doubt that the reduction of the grants to the housing associations will provide me with the funds to do some of that work.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Minister's statement and questions. The House may be interested to know that 24 Members had an opportunity to put questions to the Minister, and I thank them for their co-operation.

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 12.48 pm.

*On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —
2.00 pm*

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Appointment of junior Minister

Mr K Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Do we have a quorum?

Notice taken that 10 Members were not present.

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

Upon 10 Members being present —

Mr Speaker: We now have a quorum, and may commence business. This afternoon, I received notification of the resignation of the Rt Hon Jeffrey Donaldson MP from the position of Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. I have also been informed by the First Minister and deputy First Minister that, with immediate effect, they have appointed Mr Donaldson as a junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mr Donaldson has affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office, as set out in schedule 4 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. That affirmation was witnessed by me and Mrs Carol Devon, the Interim Clerk/Director General of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Mr Donaldson is now a junior Minister.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Taxis Bill

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: Members have a copy of the Marshalled List of Amendments, detailing the order for consideration. Members will also have a copy of the Speaker's provisional grouping of amendments selected list, which shows how the amendments have been grouped for debate.

There are five groups of amendments, and we shall debate the amendments in each group in turn. Therefore, during the Consideration Stage of the Bill, there will be five mini-debates.

The first mini-debate concerns 44 technical amendments, which are listed as group 1 on the Speaker's provisional grouping of amendments selected list.

The second mini-debate will consider the two-tier system for dealing with appeals, which will allow for an initial appeal to the Department of the Environment (DOE) and, subsequently, to a court. Those 23 amendments are listed as group 2 on the Speaker's provisional grouping of amendments selected list.

The third mini-debate will consider amendment Nos 5, 28 and 64, which deal with the Consumer Council's role and the publication of information.

The fourth mini-debate will consider amendment Nos 11 and 33, which deal with the management of queues at taxi stands by marshals.

The fifth mini-debate will deal with amendment No 71, which deals with allowing traffic attendants to enforce parking infringements by taxis.

All five mini-debates will be led by the Minister of the Environment. For the benefit of Members, she will explain the amendments as we progress. I remind Members that they may speak during all, or any, of the five grouped debates. Members must address the subject matter of the debate in question. For example, during the debate on group 2, Members must address the two-tier appeal system.

During the debates on the five groups of amendments, Members should address all the amendments in each group on which they wish to comment. Once the initial debate on each group of amendments is complete, there will be no further opportunity to debate those amendments. Subsequently, amendments in the group will be moved formally by the Minister as we go through the Bill, after which the Question on each will be put. The Questions on clauses to stand part of the Bill will be put at the appropriate points. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

We now come to the first group of amendments for debate: amendment No 1 to clause 1, with which it will

be convenient to debate the other 43 technical amendments in this group. These amendments are intended to provide greater clarity and consistency and do not involve any change in policy.

Clause 1 (Requirement for operator's licence)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 1, line 14, leave out from “and” to end of line 15.

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 4: In clause 3, page 3, line 30, leave out from “and” to end of line 31. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 6: In clause 3, page 4, line 5, leave out from “and” to end of line 6. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 7: In clause 3, page 4, line 8, leave out from “and” to end of line 9. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 8: In clause 4, page 4, line 20, leave out from “and” to end of line 21. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 9: In clause 5, page 5, line 6, leave out from “and” to end of line 7. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 10: In clause 6, page 5, line 20, leave out paragraph (c) and insert

“(c) include such other provision as the Department thinks fit.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 12: In clause 6, page 5, line 37, leave out subsection (3). — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 13: In clause 10, page 6, line 27, at beginning insert “Subject to subsection (4A).” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 14: In clause 10, page 6, line 38, leave out “subject to subsection (3).” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 15: In clause 10, page 7, line 6, leave out subsection (3). — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 16: In clause 10, page 7, line 13, after “(2),” insert “subject to subsection (4A).” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 17: In clause 10, page 7, line 22, at end insert

“(4A) Subsections (1), (2) and (4) shall not apply, for or until such time or for such a period as may be prescribed, in relation to a person who is applying to be authorised under an operator's licence to operate a taxi service for or in respect of the carriage of passengers at separate fares and who—

(a) immediately before the coming into operation of this section, was the holder of a road service licence to provide a service on the same routes granted under the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967; or

(b) meets any other requirements that may be prescribed.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 23: In clause 12, page 8, line 20, leave out subsection (5). — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 26: In clause 14, page 9, line 34, leave out from “and” to end of line 35. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 27: In clause 15, page 10, line 10, leave out subsection (6). — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 29: In clause 16, page 10, line 28, leave out from “and” to end of line 29. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 30: In clause 17, page 11, line 2, leave out from “and” to end of line 3. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 31: In clause 18, page 11, line 35, leave out subsection (9). — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 32: In clause 19, page 12, line 2, leave out from “and” to end of line 3. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 34: In clause 20, page 13, line 5, leave out from “and” to end of line 6. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 35: In clause 22, page 15, line 34, leave out subsections (8) and (9). — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 38: In clause 24, page 17, line 26, leave out from “and” to end of line 28. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 40: In clause 27, page 19, line 9, leave out subsection (3) and insert

“(3) A licence suspended under this Act shall remain suspended until such time as the Department by notice directs that the licence is again in force.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 48: In clause 31, page 21, line 31, leave out from “and” to end of line 32. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 49: In clause 32, page 22, line 23, leave out subsection (7). — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 51: In clause 36, page 24, line 2, leave out from “and” to end of line 3. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 55: In clause 37, page 24, line 26, after “premises” insert “and any equipment”. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 56: In clause 37, page 24, line 36, after second “premises” insert “and any equipment”. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 57: In clause 38, page 26, line 3, leave out from “and” to end of line 4. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 58: In clause 42, page 28, line 10, leave out “20(2)(c)” and insert “20”. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 59: In clause 42, page 28, line 11, leave out subsection (4). — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 60: In clause 43, page 28, line 36, leave out subsection (4). — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 61: In clause 44, page 29, line 17, leave out from “and” to end of line 18. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 62: In clause 44, page 29, line 26, leave out from “and” to end of line 27. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 63: In clause 44, page 29, line 30, leave out from “and” to end of line 31. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 65: In clause 52, page 31, line 3, at end insert

“(2A) Notwithstanding anything in subsection (2), for the purposes of section 14 of the Finance Act (Northern Ireland) 1996 (c. 21) an operator’s licence which authorises the licensed operator to operate a taxi service for or in respect of the carriage of passengers at separate fares shall be deemed to be a road service licence granted or deemed to have been granted under Part 2 of the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 66: In clause 53, page 31, line 26, leave out subsection (4) and insert

“(4) Subsection (5) applies to byelaws made or having effect as if made under Article 65 of the 1981 Order which—

(a) relate to taxis; and

(b) are in force immediately before the coming into operation of section 52(1).

(5) Notwithstanding anything in section 52(1)—

(a) provisions of those byelaws which could have been included in an order under Article 27A of the Road Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 shall have effect as if contained in such an order; and

(b) any other provisions of those byelaws shall have effect as if contained in regulations made under section 20.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 67: In clause 55, page 32, line 22, at end insert “‘notice’ means notice in writing;”. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 68: Leave out clause 57 and insert

“Commencement

57. This Act (except sections 53 to 55, this section and section 58) shall come into operation on such day or days as the Department may by order appoint.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 69: In schedule 2, page 38, line 23, after “taxi” insert

“(within the meaning of the Taxis Act (Northern Ireland) 2008)”. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 70: In schedule 2, page 38, line 39, at end insert

“4A. In section 37A (carrying of assistance dogs in private hire vehicles)—

(a) for ‘private hire vehicle’, each place it occurs, substitute ‘taxi’;

(b) in subsection (9)—

(i) for the definition of “driver” substitute—

“‘driver’ means a person who holds a taxi driver’s licence granted under—

(a) Article 79A of the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1981; or

(b) section 23 of the Taxis Act (Northern Ireland) 2008;”;

(ii) after the definition of “assistance dog” insert—

“‘booking’ means a taxi booking within the meaning given by section 55(1) of the Taxis Act (Northern Ireland) 2008;”;

(iii) for the definition of “operator” substitute—

“‘operator’ means a person who holds an operator’s licence granted under section 2 of the Taxis Act (Northern Ireland) 2008;”.

— *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 72: In schedule 3, page 40, line 8, at end insert

“The Road Traffic (Amendment) Article 6 (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 (NI 3) In Schedule 3, Part 2”.

— *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

No 73: In schedule 3, page 40, line 9, leave out “paragraph 16(2)” and insert “paragraphs 16(2) and 21A(2)”. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

As you have noted, Mr Speaker, the amendments in this group or, indeed, any of the amendments to be debated at this stage do not involve any change of policy. Rather, as I see it — and the Committee for the Environment agrees with me — these are designed to make what is already a good Bill a little better.

Before I move on to the amendments, it would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to the team that has worked with me and the Committee for the Environment on the taxis legislation: Adele Watters, Bill Laverty and John McMullan, who are in the Officials’ Box. I want to put on record my thanks for the way in which they brought the Bill to me and discussed it with me. I know that the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment will echo those comments. In particular, I am delighted that Bill Laverty is in the Chamber today, because Friday is his last day with us.

The first group of amendments is largely made up of technical amendments intended to improve the drafting of the Bill. They remove ambiguities in the current wording of the Bill and seek to maintain consistency with the main body of road traffic legislation. I understand that all of the first group of amendments has been explained in some detail to the Committee and that a consensus has been reached in tabling them. I thank the Committee, not least for its patience in handling such a volume of departmental amendments but generally for its detailed scrutiny of the Bill with all the interested parties and its suggestions for further amendments, which we will deal with later.

Amendment No 1 to clause 1 is the first in a run of 25 identical amendments that relate to all the references to offences and penalties in the body of the Bill. As currently drafted, the mode of trial and the level of penalty for each offence are referred to throughout the Bill. The drafting convention for road traffic legislation is not to state that in the body of the Bill but to state only that a person will be guilty of an offence and to then insert the mode of trial and penalties into the Road Traffic Offenders (Northern Ireland) Order 1996.

As drafted, the Bill provides for insertion into the Road Traffic Offenders (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 as well as referring to the mode of trial and penalties throughout the Bill. That is not wrong; however, to be consistent with other legislation and to avoid duplication, amendment No 1 removes references to the mode of trial and penalties in the body of the Bill.

Concluding my explanation of this run of amendments, I should point out that there are 24 identical amendments in the first group; namely, amendment Nos 4, 6 to 9, 23, 26, 27, 29, 30 to 32, 34, 35, 38, 48, 49, 51, 57 and 59 to 63. Amendment Nos 10 and 12 affect clause 6 and are intended to clarify the Department's power to make subordinate legislation to provide for taxi-sharing schemes. Those powers will allow the Department to introduce regulated taxi-sharing schemes, the purpose of which would be to help to disperse crowds in town and city centres at peak times when the demand for taxis often outstrips supply.

Amendment No 10 redrafts clause 6 to make it clear that the Department may make other provisions in respect of taxi-sharing schemes as it thinks fit. Amendment No 12 relates to clause 6(3), which permits the Department to vary any taxi-sharing scheme made by it under this section. The Interpretation Act (Northern Ireland) 1954 enables Departments to amend subordinate legislation. Therefore, clause 6(3) is not needed, and it is proposed that it should be removed.

Amendment Nos 13 to 17 relate to clause 10, which covers taxi operators who wish to provide bus-type services. To do so at present they must obtain a road service licence — that is, a bus operator's licence —

by satisfying fairly rigorous criteria set out in the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967.

Under the Taxis Bill, operators will no longer need such a licence. They will, however, still have to satisfy exactly the same criteria from the 1967 Act, which are now set out in clause 10. My intention is to exempt anyone who already holds a road service licence from having to satisfy the same conditions again. Inadvertently, our exemption extended to only one criterion — the suitability of routes.

To conclude, amendments 13 to 17 restore the policy intention by providing exemption from all the conditions set out in clause 10 for existing holders of road service licences and enabling the Department to make further exemptions if needed.

Amendment 40 relates to clause 27. That clause sets out the time during which a licence will be suspended or curtailed. A licence may be curtailed by either removing one or more taxis from the licence or reducing the maximum number of taxis that may be operated. The period for which a licence may be curtailed is already covered in clause 26(4) and the proposed amendment simply removes reference to curtailment in clause 27, thus eliminating a contradiction in the legislation.

Amendments 55 and 56 relate to clause 37, which deals with powers of entry to taxi operating centres, or to premises suspected of being used as such. The clause provides that a constable or an authorised officer of the Department may inspect premises and any other item. However, the powers of seizure in the clause extend to seizing any equipment as well as any other item. Therefore, to be consistent, amendments 55 and 56 will enable officers to inspect premises, items and any equipment.

Amendment 58 relates to clause 42, which deals with taxi touts. Taxi toutting happens when a person solicits someone to be carried for hire or reward in a taxi. Clause 42, as currently drafted, already includes an exemption to that offence if the behaviour is permitted by certain provisions of the Bill and by regulations made under one sub-paragraph of the Bill — clause 20(2)(c). Amendment 58 simply provides a general exemption to the toutting offence if the behaviour is permitted by any regulations made under the Bill. In line with the policy intention behind clause 42, that will exempt activities dealt with by the regulations that may otherwise be misconstrued as toutting. Such activities could, for example, include situations where taxi marshals are matching customers to taxis, or where taxi operators are advertising for business in a perfectly appropriate way.

I will now explain amendment 65, which relates to clause 52 of the Bill. I should point out that this is the only amendment that the Committee was not able to consider during Committee Stage, the reason being that the need for it emerged only when Department for Regional Development (DRD) officials approached my

Department after that stage had ended. However, I understand that the Committee has since been informed of the amendment and is in agreement with it.

Amendment 65 is essentially about ensuring that taxi operators who provide bus-type services can continue to be eligible to receive fuel-duty rebate when the relevant parts of the Taxis Bill are commenced. At present, DRD can grant fuel-duty rebate to taxi operators who hold a road service licence that permits them to provide bus-type services. DRD's concern was that that should be allowed to continue after the Taxis Bill becomes law. Although there will be no road service licences granted under the Bill, an equivalent in the form of an appropriate taxi operator's licence will be issued. Amendment 65 allows such a licence to be treated as a road service licence for the purposes of fuel-duty rebate, thus maintaining the status quo for DRD.

I turn now to the last few remaining amendments in this group. Amendments 66 to 68 are minor technical amendments that relate to the savings and commencement provisions and that add at clause 55 a definition of "notice" as meaning "notice in writing".

Lastly, amendments 69 to 73 affect schedules 2 and 3 by making minor consequential amendments to other legislation where reference is made to taxis and by repealing other provisions now made obsolete by the Bill.

2.15 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): I thank the Minister for her explanation of the technical amendments. I will say a few words about the Committee Stage of the Bill. The Bill sets out a new legal framework for the regulation of taxis and taxi services. It covers the licensing of taxi operators, drivers and vehicles; fares and taximeters; hiring taxis at separate fares; and enforcement and penalties. The Bill also introduces enabling powers to make regulations in areas including the regulation of taxis, taxi operators' licences and the hiring of taxis at separate fares.

The Committee looks forward to receiving the policy proposals for proposed regulations that may arise from the Bill in due course. I hope that our dealings with the Department of the Environment on the forthcoming regulations will be as productive as they have been on the Bill.

The Committee Stage of the Taxis Bill commenced on 26 June 2007. Thereafter, the Committee conducted a detailed scrutiny of the Bill, and Committee members proposed a number of amendments when we believed that it was appropriate to do so. The Committee and the departmental officials established a good working relationship, which paid dividends when it came to agreeing amendments. The outcome of that is the highest number of proposed amendments to a Bill that have ever been considered in the Assembly.

I am glad to report that all 73 amendments to the Bill have been agreed between the Department and the Committee. On behalf of the Committee, I thank the Minister for agreeing to include some of the amendments that were originally proposed by the Committee.

I also want to put on record the Committee's thanks and appreciation to all the Committee staff and the departmental officials for their commitment and assistance to the Committee during its scrutiny of the Bill.

The Committee considered the Bill at 17 meetings between May and November 2007. We took oral evidence from 14 taxi organisations and individuals. All interested parties that provided written submissions to the Committee were invited to give evidence, and we welcomed their views.

The discussions that took place between Committee members and departmental officials during the Committee Stage of the Bill led to improved legislation. That experience should bode well for future dealings on Bills and regulations.

The Minister carefully outlined the nature and purpose of the 44 technical amendments, which are intended to improve the clarity and consistency of the Taxis Bill, and which do not involve any change in policy. The Committee was fully briefed on all the technical amendments by departmental officials. We sought and received clarification on one amendment about an exemption to the offence of taxi touting. Therefore, the Committee fully supports all the technical amendments.

Although the Committee accepts the technical amendments and has no issue with them, we did have a problem about enforcement measures, to which some of the amendments refer. That was a recurring concern to members during the Committee Stage. The Committee was informed that an enforcement officer's role is to investigate levels of non-compliance and complaints, and that one of the main focuses of the enforcement team is to deal with the unlicensed sector of the industry.

The Committee took evidence from taxi drivers and organisations, who pointed out that there was a need for greater levels of enforcement and more resources. At that time there was a team of five enforcement officers to police an industry of 11,000 taxis. The Committee felt that that was totally inadequate. The Committee agreed to include in its report a recommendation for the Department to increase the numbers in the team of enforcement officers as soon as possible and provide them with the necessary resources to carry out their duties.

The Committee took oral evidence from enforcement officials at a meeting on 11 October 2007, and we welcomed the news that a bid had been made for more enforcement officers. The Committee believes that adequate enforcement is a key aspect of the Bill, and

hopes that the necessary resources will lead to proper enforcement.

The Committee welcomes all of the amendments and commends them to the House.

Mr Weir: I suspect that the technical amendments to the Taxis Bill may not be a leading story in tonight's news. Looking round the Chamber at the start of this debate, I wondered whether one large taxi could have provided transport for all the Members present.

Nevertheless, the Taxis Bill will impact upon the general public. It should enable people to hire a taxi in the knowledge that they will be safe.

Mr Shannon: I too welcome the Bill, and I recognise it as a positive step. However, Mr Weir mentioned safety, and that is one of the issues of concern that has been expressed to me. The Taxis Bill will enable all licensed taxis to pick up passengers from the street without bookings. Will that not increase substantially the likelihood of female passengers being picked up by bogus taxi drivers? I want the Minister to address that concern.

Mr Weir: Provisions in the Bill will regulate the taxi industry fairly well. The Minister will respond more fully to Mr Shannon's concerns, but part of the rationale behind the element of the Bill to which he refers is that periods of congestion must be dealt with, particularly in Belfast city centre, where there is a shortage of taxis. The restrictions that have been placed previously on taxis gave rise to the danger of intervention by people who are unregulated, flout the law and perhaps have criminal intent. It is important that the amendments ensure proper regulation of the taxi industry in order that customers feel physically secure and are economically protected.

Taxi drivers abide by regulations, and they want a level playing field. It is important that their professionalism is noted and that they are protected; indeed, the amendments aim to do that.

I remember being in the Chamber when the Bill was introduced. I was one of several Committee members to say that I was looking forward to scrutinising the Taxis Bill — although I came to rue my words during several Committee meetings over successive weeks.

Nevertheless, there was a high level of interaction between the Committee and witnesses and the Committee and the Department, which was extremely responsive to the issues that the Committee raised. As the Chairperson of the Committee said, that demonstrates the advantages of conducting a thorough process — one that would not have happened under direct rule — to ensure that the policy on which everyone is agreed is brought into effect. Such interaction has resulted in a total of 73 amendments — 44 of which are grouped as technical amendments — and demonstrates the advantages of scrutiny.

As I understand that no time limit is placed on speeches relating to the legislative process, I will talk briefly about each of the 43 amendments. In fact, I will concentrate on three single amendments and two groups of amendments — I hear a sigh of relief going around the House at that news.

As the Chairperson said, and as applies to amendment 51, any regulation is only as good as the level of enforcement that is applied to it. There was concern in the Committee that sufficient resources were available to ensure proper enforcement. As the Chairperson said, some 11,000 taxis are in service in Northern Ireland, and it is important that provision is made to ensure that the law is enforced. Therefore, I join with other Committee members in supporting any bid that the Department might make for additional resources to ensure sufficient enforcement. It is important for the Assembly to support the amendment, but it is equally important that it is enforced.

Amendments 10 and 12 relate to the sharing of taxis. There are major advantages to regulating a taxi-sharing system to ensure that people get the best possible deal on fares. There must be fairness to ensure that fares are apportioned according to the distances that passengers travel and also to ensure that taxi drivers are not exploited or ripped off. That area of regulation requires further exploration and perfection. The concept and the underlying intention are fine, but some concerns were expressed when the Committee was given an example of what could happen. I am sorry that my colleague Mr Trevor Clarke is not here, because he became extremely excited when the Committee was discussing the details of the taxi-sharing arrangements.

It is clear that further work needs to be done to perfect the regulations. As with many of the amendments, the detail will be realised through regulations. The concept of a fair and equitable system of fares for taxi sharing is welcome, as are the vast range of technical amendments before the House. I support the group 1 technical amendments.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will not go through all the amendments.

I was trying to remember who David Ford said was keen during the Committee Stage of the Bill, but Peter Weir has cleared that up. He was correct — we certainly were keen.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill at its Consideration Stage. I support the Chairperson's comments and pay tribute to the work of the Committee, the Committee staff and the Department. I also pay tribute to the stakeholders and thank those who made submissions to the Committee.

From the outset, the Committee decided that it would leave no stone unturned and allow all interested

parties to make submissions. However, after 17 weeks, submissions from 14 groups and numerous emails, reflection is a wonderful thing. I commend all those who were involved.

The issue of enforcement has arisen many times, and the Committee has recommended more enforcement, which I hope the Department acts on. More enforcement will increase confidence in the industry and ensure that the legislation is adhered to by all taxi organisations and taxi drivers.

The last time that the Minister spoke about the Bill in the Chamber, she reminded me of the importance of the customer as well as the taxi industry. I support the pilot programme that addresses value for money, clears the streets, and eases some of the problems in cities late at night. I endorse the amendments.

Mr Gardiner: It is good to see the legislation progressing through the House in an orderly fashion and the Assembly working on normal day-to-day business.

The Taxis Bill is about improvement and contains provisions that will make it possible for the Department to improve the standard of taxi services by: bringing in operator licensing for taxi businesses; setting a maximum-fare for all taxis; requiring all taxis to have a taximeter; making all new drivers pass a taxi-driving test; insisting that all taxi drivers have relevant training that includes customer relations; allowing some taxis to operate shared services and charge individual passengers separate, but cheaper, fares; requiring operators to provide more taxis designed to meet the requirements of older people; and allowing only accessible vehicles to use taxi ranks.

Therefore, the Taxis Bill is a thoroughly useful piece of legislation that imposes a regime of regulation and service improvement in the provision of an important aspect of public-transport policy.

The Bill has progressed through the Committee, and a series of issues have been raised. It is important that enforcement is kept under review — I have heard that the present enforcement regime will be strengthened, and I want assurance that sufficient resources in manpower and, behind that, in financing, will be available. Enforcement lies at the heart of the success of any Bill and it is something to which we must pay close attention.

2.30 pm

A quick turnaround in issuing new taxi plates when taxi owners change vehicles must be ensured, because that process can lead to weeks of delay, which, in turn, can lead to lost income. There are 11,000 taxis operating in Northern Ireland, and they represent a major component in the delivery of the transport policy. The Committee Stage has produced a better Bill, which is fit for purpose and which will regulate the service for some time to come.

I commend the amendments to the House, and I ask for Members' support. Good legislation is clear legislation, and I welcome further clarity on this matter. I wish to be associated with the Committee Chairperson's paying tribute to the departmental officials and officials of the Committee for the Environment for their professional co-operation and the work that they do for the good of the environment, with respect to the Taxis Bill in particular.

Mr Ford: We should record the fact that the relatively sparse attendance in the House this afternoon, and the unanimity that has been expressed so far, are signs of the good work that has been done on the Bill, both by the Minister and her officials and by the Committee. The fact that we are not engaging in the usual sectarian ding-dong — because Members have agreed on what is best for the people of Northern Ireland — is an example of devolution working well. Although it may be an unusual practice for me, I am happy to join the cosy consensus on this occasion. However, the Minister should not read too much into that.

I thank the Minister for the way in which she has engaged with the Committee. She has accepted the fact that she thought that the Bill as introduced was good, but is now better. I thought that the Bill was not quite that good, but is definitely good now. That is a sign of what can be achieved in the House when people engage. Her officials were willing to come to the Committee week after week to face the dreary sight of up to 11 Committee members, who were there to ask awkward questions and create difficulties. However, those officials came back smiling the following week, with answers. They made an effort to engage and reach agreement, and that is a positive sign of what can be achieved.

Mr Speaker, as other Members have said, not only the Committee staff, but other Assembly staff — some of whom are at the Table with you now — have contributed to ensure that the process worked well. It is right that that be recorded, because it means that MLAs have been able to do their jobs — and that, in turn, shows that devolution has benefits.

I shall refer briefly to some of the points that have been made already. There is little need to repeat everything, and not even Peter Weir managed to refer to all 44 amendments.

There have been problems with enforcement in the past. We have heard about the limited number of enforcement officers and the huge difficulties that there have been. There is no doubt that some of the representations that were made to the Committee — particularly by some of the public-hire drivers — were entirely legitimate in expressing concerns that enforcement to date has not been carried out properly. I look forward to the additional resources that the Minister has promised and to the work being done properly.

Other issues that were raised by public-hire drivers, including delays in issuing taxi plates, are important. If we expect drivers to stick to the regulations, it will be important to ensure that the Department enables them to operate legally as speedily as possible.

Taxi-sharing schemes created a certain amount of fun, and that still hangs before us in the form of the secondary legislation that we yet have to face. That taxed our mental arithmetic at times.

Peter Weir has already referred to the unfortunate absence of Trevor Clarke this afternoon. I am not sure whether Mr Weir has him interned in the basement at party headquarters with a pocket calculator, or whether the Minister has locked him up in Clarence Court. However, there are issues that must be debated, because it is not easy to work out the type of scheme that we all agree is necessary. At least some of the officials will not have escaped by the time we consider those regulations.

One issue that concerned me when the Bill was introduced was the lack of an informal appeals process. Undoubtedly the Minister and Peter Weir will take offence when I say that I am not a great fan of involving lawyers in matters that do not require the attention of lawyers. However, the fact that we will be in a position whereby regulations can be drawn up under new clause 35(a) to set up an informal appeals process, which will make life easier for taxi drivers or taxi operators who need to go through an informal appeals process —

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I regret interrupting the leader of the Alliance Party while he is in full flow, but I understood the informal appeals procedure to be among the items in the second group of amendments, and we are debating the first group. Is that in order?

I will post Mr Ford the bill for my advice, if he likes.

Mr Speaker: It is important that Members stick to the groupings.

Mr Ford: I apologise if I have strayed, Mr Speaker. However, the Committee Chairperson and the advice note that I received from Assembly staff suggested that the informal-appeals mechanism was part of the debate on the first group of amendments, and I was speaking on that basis.

Mr Speaker: I can confirm to the Member that that issue is in the second group of amendments.

Mr Ford: In that case, I apologise, Mr Speaker. I need new glasses, and given what I can see on the document that I am holding, I need them even more.

Attending this debate seems rather like attending a wake. A small group of people who have been friends during the past few months are meeting to celebrate the passing of something that we have all grown to

know with some affection. We are here to be nice to one other and tell the odd joke. However, the offspring of the departed is approaching, and we will have to deal with it in secondary legislation. That will cause us all considerable amusement, I suspect.

Mrs Foster: I thank everyone who contributed to the debate on the first group of amendments. It is right to say that, but for devolution, the Bill would have gone through Westminster as an Order in Council. There would have been no opportunity to amend it, and there certainly would not have been 73 amendments tabled. This debate shows that devolution is working and that the Committees are providing the necessary scrutiny on such pieces of legislation.

I concur with the comments that Mr Gardiner, Mr Ford and others made that the Bill is better as a result of devolution. Despite the Committee's needing 17 meetings to discuss the Bill, I am sure that Committee members will be glad that they held all those meetings when it comes to discussing the "child" of the Taxis Bill to which Mr Ford referred.

As I explained earlier, all the amendments have been agreed by the Committee. The majority of them are technical in nature, and none of them in any way undermines the Bill's policy intention, which is to improve the way in which taxi services and providers are regulated.

Nevertheless, it is important that the amendments are made, in order to ensure, for example, that taxi-sharing schemes can operate without breaching rules that are designed to prevent taxi toutting and that businesses that use taxis to provide bus-type services can continue to do so on the same basis as before.

I wish to deal with some of the general points that the Chairperson, the Deputy Chairperson and other Committee members raised. They have raised concern about the effectiveness and resourcing of the Driver and Vehicle Agency's (DVA) taxi enforcement team. They have also expressed doubts as to whether, in the light of those concerns, the legislation will be properly enforced.

During the debate on the Taxis Bill's Second Stage, I stated my position on enforcement, and I thought that I had made it absolutely clear. Any system of regulation is only as good as its enforcement. My commitment to ensuring that my Department's taxi enforcement team is adequately resourced for the task ahead is absolutely clear. Therefore, I am delighted to inform Members that, after the recent comprehensive spending review, the Driver and Vehicle Agency has secured substantial additional resources for taxi enforcement. As that funding comes on stream, the number of enforcement officers will increase progressively from five to 18 over the next three financial years.

To close on the vital issue of enforcement, I am confident that the Taxis Bill, supported by the new funding, will give my Department the power and resources that it needs to tackle illegal taxiing, and it will enable the taxi industry to deliver safer and better services for all.

I am also very aware — I am sure that the Chairperson and Committee members will remember — that much debate took place in Committee about taxi-sharing schemes, as Mr Weir has said.

The fine detail of where and when schemes might run was investigated. There was also a heated discussion as to who should benefit most from taxi sharing, the taxi driver or the passengers. I am looking around to see whether Trevor Clarke is here, but, unfortunately, he is not.

There were even questions such as: what would the fare be for a shared taxi from Belfast to Glengormley — perhaps that was Mr Boylan's question — on a Friday night, if there were four in the taxi to start with, the first person was dropped off at the bottom of the Antrim Road, the second got out near the zoo, and only one person went all the way to the final destination?

Members will not be surprised to learn that the answer to that question is not found in the Bill. Otherwise, it would be considerably longer than it already is at 58 clauses and three schedules.

On a more serious note, that level of detail will be included in the child of the Taxis Bill: the subordinate legislation that my Department will draw up, discuss with the Committee and consult on before any taxi-sharing scheme is introduced. The Bill recognises that taxi sharing goes on, that it can help make maximum use of available taxis at busy times and places, but that it needs to be regulated so that passengers do not lose out.

Mr Ford raised the issue of how long it takes the DVA to send out taxi licence plates when a driver changes his vehicle. Evidence to the Committee highlighted that, in some cases, that can take up to six weeks, during which the driver is unable to work legally. The DVA accepts that, when a driver chooses or is forced to change his vehicle during the period of validity of a licence, it can take time to process and issue new plates and licences. That matter will be addressed in due course, as new vehicle-licensing regulations, made under the Bill, are brought forward. My Department is currently in the process of procuring a new IT system for taxi licensing, implementation of which will provide an opportunity for us to review our existing licensing processes and, where feasible, streamline and expedite that process.

Jim Shannon asked whether the Taxis Bill would increase the likelihood of female passengers being picked up by bogus taxi drivers. He intervened in Mr Weir's speech to make that valid point. The answer is:

definitely not. The vast majority of taxis in Northern Ireland are already allowed to pick up passengers without a booking. The change to enable all taxis to operate in that way will affect less than 20% of vehicles. In future, passengers will, as now, need to be vigilant and take care to protect their own personal safety. They can do that by looking out for the distinctive licence plates inside and outside the vehicle. If a vehicle does not bear those plates, passengers should not get in it.

Amendment No 1 agreed to.

Clause 1, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 (Operator's licences)

Mr Speaker: We now come to the second group of amendments for debate. The lead amendment is amendment No 2 to clause 2. This group of amendments deals with appeals, and provides for a two-tier appeals system, allowing an initial appeal to the Department and, subsequently, to a court.

Mrs Foster: I beg to move amendment No 2: In page 2, line 30, leave out from "appeal" to end of line 31 and insert

"by notice appeal to the Department against".

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 3: In page 2, line 38, at end insert

"(9) The time within which a person may bring such an appeal is 21 days from the date on which the notice of the decision appealed against is served on the person.

(10) On an appeal under subsection (8), the Department may decide to—

(a) confirm, reverse or vary the decision; or

(b) approve, revoke or vary the condition,

(as the case may be) as it thinks fit.

(11) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (10), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the grounds of the decision.

(12) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (10) may appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against any such decision." — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

No 18: In clause 11, page 7, line 24, after "2(8)" insert "or (12)". — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

No 19: In clause 11, page 7, line 27, leave out "in writing". — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

No 20: In clause 11, page 7, line 42, leave out "in writing". — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

No 21: In clause 11, page 8, line 1, after "2(8)" insert "or (12)". — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

No 22: In clause 11, page 8, line 4, leave out subsection (6). — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

No 24: In clause 13, page 9, line 7, leave out from “appeal” to end of line 8 and insert

“by notice appeal to the Department against”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

No 25: In clause 13, page 9, line 13, at end insert

“(9) The time within which a person may bring such an appeal is 21 days from the date on which the notice of the decision appealed against is served on the person.

(10) On an appeal under subsection (8), the Department may decide to—

(a) confirm, reverse or vary the decision; or

(b) approve, revoke or vary the condition.

(as the case may be) as it thinks fit.

(11) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (10), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the grounds of the decision.

(12) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (10) may appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against any such decision.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

No 36: In clause 23, page 16, line 32, leave out from “appeal” to end of line 33 and insert

“by notice appeal to the Department against”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

No 37: In clause 23, page 16, line 36, at end insert

“(9A) The time within which a person may bring such an appeal is 21 days from the date on which the notice of the decision appealed against is served on the person.

(9B) On an appeal under subsection (9), the Department may decide to—

(a) confirm, reverse or vary the decision; or

(b) approve, revoke or vary the condition,

(as the case may be) as it thinks fit.

(9C) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (9B), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the ground of the decision.

(9D) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (9B) may appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against any such decision.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

No 39: In clause 27, page 19, leave out lines 1 to 8 and insert

“(b) (subject to section 35), it shall direct in the notice when the suspension, revocation or curtailment is to take effect.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

No 41: In clause 27, page 19, line 13, leave out

“appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction”

and insert

“by notice appeal to the Department”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

No 42: In clause 27, page 19, line 14, at end insert

“(4A) The time within which a person may bring such an appeal is 21 days from the date on which the notice of the decision appealed against is served on the person.

(4B) On an appeal under subsection (4), the Department may decide to confirm, reverse or vary the decision as it thinks fit.

(4C) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (4B), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the grounds of the decision.

(4D) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (4B) may appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against any such decision.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

No 43: In clause 28, page 19, line 41, leave out

“appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction”

and insert

“by notice appeal to the Department”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

No 44: In clause 28, page 19, line 42, at end insert

“(9) The time within which a person may bring such an appeal is 21 days from the date on which the notice of the decision appealed against is served on the person.

(10) On an appeal under subsection (8), the Department may decide to confirm, reverse or vary the decision as it thinks fit.

(11) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (10), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the grounds of the decision.

(12) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (10) may appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against any such decision.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

No 45: In clause 29, page 20, leave out lines 15 to 20 and insert

“(b) (subject to section 35), it shall direct in the notice when the decision is to take effect.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

No 46: In clause 29, page 20, line 21, leave out

“appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction”

and insert

“by notice appeal to the Department”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

No 47: In clause 29, page 20, line 22, at end insert

“(4A) The time within which a person may bring such an appeal is 21 days from the date on which the notice of the decision appealed against is served on the person.

(4B) On an appeal under subsection (4), the Department may decide to confirm, reverse or vary the decision as it thinks fit.

(4C) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (4B), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the grounds of the decision.

(4D) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (4B) may appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against any such decision.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

No 50: After clause 35 insert

“Regulations in respect of appeals

35A. The Department may by regulations make such further provision in respect of appeals under this Act as it considers necessary or expedient.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster)*.]

No 52: In clause 36, page 24, line 14, leave out

“appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction”

and insert

“by notice appeal to the Department”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster)*.]

No 53: In clause 36, page 24, line 14, at end insert

“(6A) On an appeal under this section, the Department may either cancel or affirm the notice, and if it affirms it, it may do so either in its original form or with such modifications as the Department may in the circumstances think fit.

(6B) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (6A) give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the grounds of the decision.

(6C) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (6A) may within 21 days of the notice being served under subsection (6B), appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster)*.]

No 54: In clause 36, page 24, line 18, leave out “or with such” and insert

“, in its form as modified by the Department under subsection (6A) or with such other”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster)*.]

This group of amendments has been proposed by the Committee. I thank the Chairman and the Committee for their work. I am happy to move the amendments as I am in complete agreement with what has been proposed.

As drafted, the Bill provides for an appeal by taxi operators and drivers to the magistrates’ courts against various decisions on taxi licensing. During oral evidence sessions before the Committee, it was suggested by taxi industry representatives that an appeal should first lead to the Department, before having to go to court.

The combined effect of the 23 amendments in this group is to provide for a two-tier appeal system. This is how it will work: the first tier of the appeal against the decision, for example, to suspend a taxi driver’s licence, will be to the Department within 21 days of being notified of the Department’s decision. It is envisaged that a panel of three senior officers, not involved in making the earlier decision, will conduct the appeal, having invited the appellant and his or her legal advisers, to attend an oral hearing. Having considered the relevant evidence, facts and law, the panel will make a recommendation to the decision-making part of the Department to confirm, reverse or vary the decision.

The Department must give the appellant notice of the decision and the grounds on which it is to be based.

If the driver is still aggrieved by the decision, he or she may make a further appeal to a Magistrate’s Court.

2.45 pm

I see great merit in the two-stage approach. First, it provides a cost-effective and efficient first-tier appeal. Secondly, it will reduce the burden on the courts in that specialist area of law. Thirdly, it is totally compliant with human rights requirements in that an independent appeal to the courts is retained.

The 23 amendments address all instances in the Bill in which only an appeal to the courts is being provided for. They also provide for a new clause, clause 35A, which will enable the Department to make regulations in respect of appeals. That ends my explanation of the amendments in group two.

Mr McGlone: I wish to raise an issue about the two-tier appeals system, on which some of the amendments touch. The Committee was concerned that the Bill was not providing for an informal appeals mechanism for departmental decisions on licensing and licences that authorise separate fares, and that appeals by taxi drivers or operators would go straight to a Magistrate’s Court.

Throughout the oral evidence sessions, several organisations and individuals suggested that an internal review by the Department or other independent body should take place before an appeal would be taken to court. As the Minister said, the Department saw merit in the suggestion, and the Committee asked for clarification of how that would work.

In a written response to the Committee, the Department stated that a similar system is operating in relation to the refusal of a road freight operator’s licence or bus licence. In those cases, the applicant’s first recourse is to an internal review panel set up by the Department. The appellant has an opportunity to present his case and produce evidence. Having considered the facts of the case and the law, the panel will make a recommendation to the decision-making part of the Department on whether the decision should be upheld or changed. If the person is still dissatisfied with the decision, he or she can pursue the case through the courts.

The Committee saw a lot of merit in a similar arrangement being set up for appeals by taxi drivers or operators and suggested an amendment that was similar to the wording in clause 11 to provide for an informal appeals mechanism throughout the Bill. The Department agreed to the amendment, and that has led to several minor and consequential amendments throughout the Bill. It has also led to the introduction of the new clause to which the Minister referred, clause 35A, which provides power for the Department to make regulations in respect of appeals. The Committee is pleased to note that the new two-tier appeal system is

now provided for legislatively throughout the Bill, and the Committee supports those amendments.

The Committee commends all amendments for this debate to the House.

Mr Weir: Earlier, I mentioned the importance of the interaction between the Committee and the Department to produce the best possible legislation. An ideal example of that is the fact that the suggestion for a two-tier appeal mechanism, which came forward strongly during evidence sessions, was put in place by the Department. If two tiers are put in, further tears will not be shed at a later stage of the taxi appeal process. *[Laughter.]*

Lawyers occasionally get beyond bad jokes, and in case Mr Ford has to lie down in the same darkened room in which we have locked Trevor Clarke, I find myself in agreement with some of his pre-emptive remarks. Mr Ford said that, as much as possible, lawyers and courts should be used as a last resort. It is not appropriate to clog up the court system with a range of appeals, particularly those that could be resolved at an earlier stage. It is right that the court system has been retained as the ultimate appeal mechanism to deal with dissatisfaction, because the decision could affect the livelihoods of individuals. However, it is appropriate that the appeals mechanism be put in place, so I welcome the proposals that have been included.

An issue was raised during the Committee Stage regarding, in particular, cross-border trade with the Republic of Ireland.

It is important that there is cross-frontier co-operation in the examination of criminal records, whether it is with the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain, or Europe, because pooling information will ensure that an appropriate check is carried out on people with particular criminal convictions before licences are granted. That will be of benefit to people who use taxis and who therefore look for assurance that they will be safe. Indeed, Jim Shannon raised particular concerns in relation to females being picked up at night by taxis.

Criminal record checks will benefit Northern Ireland taxi drivers, who want to ensure that the reputation of their industry remains untarnished. Where serious criminal convictions make it inappropriate for someone — whether inside or outside Northern Ireland — to hold a taxi licence, it is important that that information is made available as widely as possible to ensure that the person is prevented from getting a licence, thus preserving the integrity of the taxi industry.

Although this is perhaps not a matter for legislation, we must explore the levels of co-operation that can be achieved among the jurisdictions to ensure that the taxi industry is kept free from that sort of problem. It is an issue that cuts both ways, because I would like to think

that pooling information would ensure that, for instance, whatever system applies in the Republic of Ireland, a degree of protection would be afforded in that taxi drivers from the Republic would not be disqualified from driving in Northern Ireland. That important issue must be addressed.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I preface my remarks with a declaration of interest as a member of my family works in the taxi industry. I am not a member of the Environment Committee; however, I have followed the Bill's progress with great interest and anticipation. I heard it said today that there were 17 meetings, and I thanked God that I had heard that from a distance and not as a member of the Committee. That is not a reflection on any Committee members of course.

The Bill will go a long way towards ensuring the best promotion of the taxi industry with regard to regulation, service, and what the industry is seeking to achieve as a public transport provider. Sinn Féin has been, and remains, supportive of the Minister's efforts: her work, and that of her officials, must be acknowledged. Workers in the industry have told me how pleased they were with the reception they got when they came to make their points to the Minister and the Committee. As Cathal Boylan has reminded us, times without number, about the 17 meetings, I am therefore putting the above point on record for Committee members and officials.

The Committee's scrutiny has strengthened the Bill. Others have said that the resulting legislation will enhance the taxi industry and ensure that it carries out the job for which it is intended.

With regard to convictions; there have been several significant court rulings on political convictions and PSV licences, and I should have liked those to have been reflected in the Bill as regards a person's suitability for work in the industry. I understand that that legislation is not the responsibility of the Minister; however, I would like to flag up that issue. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Armstrong: I, too, wish to record my appreciation of the staff of the Committee and the Department for their hard work during our scrutiny of the Bill.

I am concerned that criminal record checks for Public Service Vehicle (PSV) licence applicants do not extend to the Republic of Ireland or to foreign nationalists. The good reputation of our taxi drivers should not be put in jeopardy by others: that is wrong on several counts. Just think of the danger the Minister's sister, or my daughter, could be in by hiring a taxi that is being driven by someone whose criminal record has not been examined. I am sure that other Committee members have concerns for daughters and sisters in their families.

For one thing, there is a basic issue of public safety. Checks are there for a reason, which is, as far as possible, to ensure that someone who is permitted to drive members of the public to their preferred destinations is a fit and proper person.

In view of the growing number of people living and working in Northern Ireland who are from the Republic of Ireland or overseas, a huge loophole would be created if it were only Northern Irish applicants who were subject to checks. There is an obvious equality issue with that. It is not sensible that applicants from Northern Ireland should face a more stringent test than others. On grounds of public safety and equality, such a situation cannot be allowed to develop. For the scheme to have any credibility, the Department should extend the checks to non-Northern Ireland nationalists.

Mr Ford: I am grateful for the opportunity to experience déjà vu. I agree with Peter Weir agreeing with me on the point that he cut me off from making earlier. I am delighted to hear that the House's representative from the Bar Council believes in keeping lawyers out of things wherever possible. However, I am not sure whether the solicitor who is sitting beside him, hissing, agrees with him; we shall see.

There are clear reasons why provisions that are similar to the appeals mechanism that already exists — informally — in the Department should be introduced as part of this Bill. As ever, the Bill will generate yet another offspring, the welfare of which we will have to consider in the future. We look forward to seeing those regulations proceed so that we have a fair, early, cheap appeals process in order that taxi drivers and operators do not feel that they have to appeal to the courts if it can possibly be avoided.

Mr Gallagher: I too thank the Minister and her staff for the work that they have done in bringing the Bill to this Stage. Equally, I pay tribute to the Committee Clerk and staff of the Environment Committee and to my colleagues there. Representing as I do a border constituency, on 23 October 2007 I raised the issue of whether criminal-record checks extended to applicants from the Republic of Ireland or to foreign nationals. The Department said that:

“the current process of checking criminal records does not systematically involve checking records in the Republic of Ireland. When it comes to implement the Taxis Bill the Department will need to review the current driver licensing regulations.”

It is quite clear from what others have said that all members of the Environment Committee remain concerned about this issue. We recommend that the Department consider extending the checks to citizens of the Republic of Ireland and to foreign nationals.

Mrs Foster: I thought that Billy Armstrong was answering Raymond McCartney's question when he mentioned “non-Northern Ireland nationalists”. As Mr

McCartney will know, I cannot answer the point that he raised; it should be raised elsewhere.

I thank the Members who asked questions and raised issues in the debate on this second group of amendments. As I said, they are Committee amendments arising out of representations made by the taxi industry, and I am happy to support them.

The issue that Members have raised most notably is that of how the Department carries out criminal-record checks on licence applicants who have lived or worked outside Northern Ireland. That point was raised by Mr Weir, Mr Armstrong, Mr Gallagher and others. In particular, there are clear concerns about the fact that existing checks do not routinely extend to the Republic of Ireland or cover foreign nationals. That is a very valid point.

To begin with, all applicants for taxi licences must have a home address in Northern Ireland. Where the Department is aware that an applicant has previously had an address outside the UK, it requires the submission of a certificate of good conduct or good repute from the applicant's country of origin. If there are concerns about the validity of such documents, the Department will refer the matter to the respective Embassy or consulate for advice.

3.00 pm

The position on criminal-record checks is that my Department obtains details of criminal records from the PSNI's criminal-record office in respect of applications for new and for renewal taxi driver licences. From April 2008, a new body called access NI will be responsible for providing that service. Access NI will be a criminal history disclosure service established by the Government under part V of the Police Act 1997. It provides access to criminal history information for individuals and, in certain circumstances, to organisations that are recruiting to sensitive positions. Access NI cannot search the databases of other countries. However, in some cases the PSNI may have access to the records of individuals who live in the Republic of Ireland, and details of those individuals will be included in the criminal record checks provided by access NI. I hope that that clarifies the issue of records.

Mr Ford said that he hoped that the two-tier process would be cheaper for taxi drivers. I also hope that. Unfortunately, in the past, two-tier appeal systems have led to people involving solicitors, paying them out of their own pocket and not being able to avail of legal aid because it is not available for such a process. I hope that it is a cheap, informal process that can move quickly. If there is a need to move to the core process, then it can become formal. That is my hope for the two-tier appeal system, but we will have to wait to see how it develops.

Amendment No 2 agreed to.

Amendment No 3 made: In page 2, line 38, at end insert

“(9) The time within which a person may bring such an appeal is 21 days from the date on which the notice of the decision appealed against is served on the person.

(10) On an appeal under subsection (8), the Department may decide to

(a) confirm, reverse or vary the decision; or

(b) approve, revoke or vary the condition,

(as the case may be) as it thinks fit.

(11) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (10), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the grounds of the decision.

(12) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (10) may appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against any such decision.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster)*.]

Clause 2, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3 (Duties of licensed operators, etc.)

Amendment No 4 made: In page 3, line 30, leave out from “and” to end of line 31. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster)*.]

Mr Speaker: We come to the third group of amendments for debate — amendment No 5, with which it will be convenient to debate amendment No 28 and amendment No 64. The amendments deal with the role of the Consumer Council and the publication of information.

Mrs Foster: I beg to move amendment No 5: In page 4, line 3, at end insert

“(and without prejudice to the generality of the foregoing, regulations may include provision for the involvement of the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland in relation to any such complaints).”

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 28: In clause 16, page 10, line 26, at end insert

“(2A) Before the Department makes any regulations under this section, it shall take into consideration any recommendations made by the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster)*.]

No 64: After clause 48 insert

“Publication of information

48A. —(1) The Department may publish, in such form and manner as it thinks appropriate, information in connection with the provisions of this Act.

(2) Before the Department publishes any such information under subsection (1), it shall take into consideration any recommendation made by the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster)*.]

This group of amendments was also suggested by the Committee, having taken advice and evidence from the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland. I

fully support them, as they give the legislation a clear consumer focus. Amendment No 5 relates to clause 3(9), which deals with complaints made to licensed operators. The amendment will give the Department power to make regulations to involve the Consumer Council in dealing with complaints. The council has considerable experience in dealing with consumer complaints in the transport sector, and it is useful to have the regulatory power to draw on that. The exact detail of its role will be worked out in regulations following consultation with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Consumer Council, the taxi industry and, of course, the Committee for the Environment.

Amendment No 28 relates to clause 16, which deals with the regulation of fares. It provides that when the Department is setting fares it must take into consideration any recommendations made by the Consumer Council. The amendment does not bind the Department to accept those recommendations, but they must be sought and given due consideration with all other representations. At present, the Consumer Council is normally consulted about any proposed increase in taxi fares in any event, but I agree with that being made explicit in the Bill.

Amendment No 64 is the final amendment in the group. It inserts new clause 48A to deal with the publication of information. It enables the Department to publish information on the provisions of the Bill, and, in so doing, it must take into consideration any recommendations made by the Consumer Council.

The Bill creates a revised legal framework for the regulation of taxis in Northern Ireland. The Department will need to inform both the taxi industry and consumers of their rights and responsibilities.

Amendment 64 will enable the Department to avail itself of the considerable experience and expertise of the Consumer Council in such matters, and I am happy to endorse that.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Committee heard evidence from representatives of the Consumer Council on 20 September 2007, who argued that that body should have embedded in the legislation a role on passenger complaints, fares, and passenger information. The Committee agreed with the Consumer Council’s views, and it asked the Department to provide a greater role for that body in the Bill.

The Committee’s proposed amendment led to the Department’s meeting with the Consumer Council, and it was agreed that its role would be embedded in the Bill through the amending of different clauses. The Committee welcomes the amendments on the role of the Consumer Council, and it is particularly gratifying to see the consumer voice embedded in the Bill.

Disability issues are dealt with by amendments 5, 28 and 16. The Committee took evidence from the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC) on 27 September and from Disability Action on 16 October 2007. The Committee was concerned to hear numerous examples of the experiences that people with disabilities have had when using taxis. It was emphasised that taxis are a key means of transport, especially for disabled people, and are often available when other transport is not.

The Committee was concerned to hear of the range of problems that have been experienced. Barbara Fleming of IMTAC and representatives from Disability Action gave evidence on such experiences. Ms Fleming's evidence touched most members who listened to it, and indeed, if Committee members were asked to recall any aspect of the evidence that was given throughout the consideration of the Taxis Bill, the personal experiences that Ms Fleming articulated certainly had a personal and profound effect on many of us.

The issues that were raised in those evidence sessions included: lack of access to wheelchair-accessible taxis and restrictions on the availability of those taxis at particular times of the day; concerns about vehicle standards and safety for the transport of persons with a disability or disabilities; refusal to transport persons with a disability; increased charges for journeys for the carriage of luggage or guide dogs, for example, or for the extra time taken for the customer to get into the taxi; uncomfortable, cramped journeys; and difficulties with the storage of mobility enhancements.

Other specific issues that were highlighted included: lack of knowledge and good practice in transporting persons in wheelchairs; lack of knowledge on the use of ramps; wheelchair users being required to travel facing sideways or sometimes the wrong way; and lack of driver training and knowledge of the effects of impairment.

Despite the fact that there is widespread and extensive good practice among the majority of taxi drivers, the Committee was obviously concerned to hear of those experiences. The Committee's report therefore recommends that the Department engages urgently with IMTAC, Disability Action, and representatives of the taxi industry, in order to address those issues.

In conclusion, the Committee agrees with all the amendments as presented, and commends them to the House.

Mr Weir: I am happy to try and keep my remarks quite brief, possibly because I am starting to run out of jokes. Indeed, as some Members may say, those jokes are getting weaker, having started from a base that was not particularly high.

I welcome the three amendments. As public representatives, we are all aware of the good work that the Consumer Council does to protect consumer interests.

The amendments are a product of the co-operation between the Committee and the Department on consumer-related interests.

The amendments deal with three issues: first, passenger complaints are largely covered in amendment 5, which includes provision for the involvement of the Consumer Council on such complaints; secondly, fares are dealt with in amendment 28, which includes a requirement that, before the Department makes any regulation in relation to fares, it will take any Consumer Council recommendation on the matter into account; and thirdly, the suggestion was made that consideration be given to the Consumer Council's recommendations on passenger information.

To be fair to the Department, that is probably, to a large extent, what was intended from the start. It clarifies the situation to ensure that there is protection.

The need for consumer protection was brought home to the Committee when it received evidence from IMTAC on disability issues, but I do not intend to go into any detail on that, because the Chairman mentioned it and my colleague Ian McCrea will also deal with it. Those of us who heard that evidence found some of the examples disturbing. We must ensure that everyone — from the most vulnerable to those who are able to cater for themselves — is looked after. It is wrong for anyone in society to be exploited. The safeguards and provisions recommended by the Consumer Council will provide that protection, and I am happy to support this group of amendments.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. My earlier declaration of interest stands. As we strive to regulate the taxi industry, it is important that the protection of taxi users be at the heart of our deliberations. I welcome the fact that the Consumer Council's position has been firmly placed in the legislation, because it means that any complaints or issues around the use of taxis will be acknowledged and protected by the Consumer Council and the legislation. The inclusion of the Consumer Council in the legislation will enhance the status of the taxi industry, because, for too long, people have seen the industry as being unregulated and haphazard. The industry will be enhanced by the fact that the issues raised by consumers and users will be heard, so Sinn Féin supports the amendments.

Mr Armstrong: I also was alarmed and disturbed by the stories that the Committee heard about the shoddy way in which some disabled taxi users are treated. For obvious reasons, disabled people are more likely than able-bodied people to rely on taxis. I know that many taxi drivers are a credit to their profession, but there are some bad apples in the industry.

Among the problems raised at the Committee were the increased charges imposed for journeys, the

carriage of luggage and the carriage of guide dogs. Members know that guide dogs are important to many people, especially the disabled. Some customers have even been charged for the extra time that it takes them to get into a taxi. Those problems must be addressed. Difficulties with the storage of mobility enhancements and a lack of knowledge of good practice in transporting them were also mentioned. Proper training, good basic manners and consideration for others are required, but most taxi drivers co-operate and are willing to assist their disabled passengers.

Mr Ford: Mr Weir said that he was running out of jokes, so may I inform the Minister that paragraph 1216 of the Minutes of Evidence gives an example of one person going to Glengormley and two to Ballyclare. However, by paragraph 1756, one of the Ballyclare people had got fed up waiting, and there were only two people travelling together.

This set of amendments is among the most serious in the Bill. We have all said that the evidence provided to the Committee by representatives of people with disabilities showed that a small number of taxi drivers treat some of our fellow citizens outrageously. The poor treatment offered to some people is not only related to fares, as has been highlighted. It can also relate to the availability of a suitable vehicle and the willingness of a taxi driver to pick up somebody who has a disability.

Those who are physically or sensually disabled — particularly the blind, who need to be accompanied by a guide dog — have no less rights than anybody else to expect that there will be a taxi available to take them where they want, when they want and at a reasonable fare. Whether that fare is the same as what other people pay, or includes some nominal additional sum for extra waiting time, is open to question. However, it is unacceptable to suggest that people can be charged double or triple fares because they are disabled.

In making regulations, in consultation with the Consumer Council, these amendments allow the Department to ensure that those issues are properly taken on board. We look forward to seeing how those matters will be dealt with in secondary legislation.

3.15 pm

It is clear that, for those who have a disability, the face of the Bill is now much improved, and we should endorse these amendments enthusiastically.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister and her officials for working with the Committee, in trying to push forward with this important legislation. I also thank the staff of the Environment Committee for the important work that they have done.

As the Chairperson of the Environment Committee said, one of the evidence sessions that stood out was

from Disability Action and Barbara Fleming of the Inclusive Mobility Transport Advisory Committee. That evidence provided the Committee with real-life examples of why this important legislation is needed. Some of the evidence informed us that blind people are being ripped off, as they cannot see the fare displayed. Not all taxi drivers behave in that manner, but there are some bad apples, as another Member mentioned.

That aspect of the Bill is important, and I ask the Minister to outline how the Department of the Environment will deal with complaints from disabled people who experience difficulties getting taxis or are overcharged. In Great Britain, the Disability Discrimination (Transport Vehicles) Regulations 2005 made it illegal for taxis and other transport operators to discriminate against disabled people. Will similar regulations be introduced in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: I am grateful to Members for their contributions to the debate on these three amendments, relating to the involvement of the Consumer Council in taxi-related issues, including complaints, fares and information.

I share Members' deep concerns about the difficulty and discrimination faced by disabled people wanting to use taxis. Oral evidence presented to the Committee highlighted a catalogue of bad practice by some — and it is just a few — drivers and operators, including refusal of service; extortionate fares; extra charges to carry wheelchairs; and so on.

In an age when Government are seeking to create more opportunities for disabled people to access jobs and services — as is their right and entitlement — I fully understand why disabled people are increasingly frustrated, not just that those sorts of practices go on, but that no one seems to do anything to stop them.

I will answer the point made by Mr Armstrong — and I am sorry that he is not in the Chamber — and other Members about guide dogs travelling in taxis. I want to make it very clear that it is illegal for taxi drivers to refuse to carry passengers with guide, hearing or other assistance dogs. That is the law at present, and I hope that the new Taxis Bill will reiterate that position.

Mr Ian McCrea asked about complaints from disabled people who experience difficulties. If there are complaints, and if the driver involved can be identified, he or she will be interviewed by taxi-licensing staff, and, where appropriate, may be warned as to future conduct. In serious cases, the Department will suspend the licence of the taxi driver in question. However, my Department receives very few complaints from disabled people about levels of service or overcharging. That is not to deny that those problems exist, but, in instances where a problem occurs, the people affected should report it to the Department.

Mr McCrea also made reference to new legislation that has recently come into effect in Great Britain, making it illegal for certain transport operators, including taxi drivers and depots, to discriminate against disabled people. I understand that there are proposals—led by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM)—to introduce similar regulations in Northern Ireland before the end of the year. I am very keen for my officials to collaborate with OFMDFM and the Department for Regional Development in that work, and to continue their ongoing engagement with IMTAC and Disability Action, to make taxi services more accessible to all people with disabilities, and to eliminate discrimination wherever it occurs.

Amendment No 5 agreed to.

Amendment No 6 made: In page 4, line 5, leave out from “and” to end of line 6. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Amendment No 7 made: In page 4, line 8, leave out from “and” to end of line 9. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Clause 3, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 4 (Hirings accepted on behalf of another operator)

Amendment No 8 made: In page 4, line 20, leave out from “and” to end of line 21. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Clause 4, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 5 (Hiring of taxis at separate fares – General)

Amendment No 9 made: In page 5, line 6, leave out from “and” to end of line 7. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Clause 5, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 6 (Compliance with a Departmental taxi-sharing scheme)

Amendment No 10 made: In page 5, line 20, leave out paragraph (c) and insert

“(c) include such other provision as the Department thinks fit.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Mr Speaker: We now come to the fourth group of amendments, which are amendment Nos 11 and 33. Those amendments deal with the management of queues at taxi stands by marshals.

Mrs Foster: I beg to move amendment No 11: In page 5, line 33, at end insert

“(ca) providing for persons to manage, and regulating the management of, the use of such authorised places;”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

The following amendment stood on the Marshalled List:

No 33: In clause 20, page 12, line 19, at end insert

“(ca) providing for persons to manage, and regulating the management of, the use of places referred to in paragraph (a);”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

The Committee suggested those amendments to clauses 6 and 20. Although they are fairly brief, I understand that they caused considerable debate in Committee. I will not rehearse Committee members’ arguments again; however, they concentrated on the proper role of taxi marshals. The primary role of taxi marshals will be to match customers to taxis at taxi ranks, particularly at ranks at which taxi-sharing schemes operate. The Committee considered that to be more of a management than an enforcement role, yet the latter was intimated in the Bill. I tend to agree with the Committee’s opinion, and the amendments clarify that point.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Committee members were concerned about taxi marshals’ role and possible powers, and felt that more thought was required in order to envisage how such a role would work in practice. The Minister was correct when she said that we spent a great deal of time considering the matter.

The Committee considered there to be an overlap in the Bill between taxi marshals’ potential enforcement powers and enforcement officers’ role and powers, and it is welcome news that, over several years, the Minister will enhance enforcement officers’ capacity.

The role of marshals in certain circumstances was unclear. The Department told the Committee that taxi marshals will not be required to have specialist knowledge and will not be given particular enforcement powers, and Committee members were happy to hear that their role will be limited, as the Minister said, to matching customers to vehicles at ranks. That will mean that taxi marshals’ role will be restricted usually, but perhaps not exclusively, to assisting customers and drivers in the taxi-sharing scheme. The Committee is also happy to hear that their enforcement role is to be limited to maintaining good order at busy taxi ranks, although, if required, the option of police, or authorised officer, backup is always there.

The Committee welcomes the amendments that relate to taxi marshals and commends them to the House.

Mr Ross: I apologise for not being in the Chamber at the beginning of the debate; I had a meeting with another Minister. I am led to believe that the Committee Stage of the Taxis Bill was a fairly lengthy exercise, so perhaps I was fortunate to join the Committee for the Environment after it had been completed.

Taxi regulations are important, because so many people use taxis, particularly after a night out. Much of

the legislation aims to improve overall safety, which is to be welcomed. As the Chairperson mentioned during his contribution, there was some concern about the issue of taxi marshals. As the Minister said, recognition of the precise role of taxi marshals has alleviated some of those concerns. I am aware that similar schemes operate in England. Part of the role of taxi marshals is to maintain and manage order at taxi ranks and queues. If taxi marshalling is operated correctly, it not only improves safety but assists customers — generally and with taxi sharing — and discourages antisocial behaviour. It is important to note that a taxi marshal is not an enforcement officer but a facilitator for those who wish to use taxis at busy ranks, and so on. I welcome this part of the Bill and support the amendments.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I must belatedly thank the Minister, because earlier I thanked everyone except her. It is sad that Mr Weir has left with his jokes, but his stand-in, Mr Ford, will perform for a few minutes, anyway. It is a pity that Trevor Clarke is not in the Chamber; he stimulated some healthy debate in the Committee and, in his absence, continues to stimulate debate.

Any discussion on taxi marshalling should mention taxi-sharing schemes. There were initial concerns about the specific role of taxi marshals and their powers. In light of the incidents that occur every weekend in city centres, taxi marshals will bring advantages such as clearing the streets and ensuring an efficient flow of people. I welcome that and support the amendments. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs Foster: I am glad that all Members welcome the idea of taxi marshals. An orderly queuing system will be infinitely better than the free-for-all that sometimes ensues late in the evening. Anyone who has queued for a taxi at Paddington station in London will be familiar with the role of taxi marshals, which is to monitor safety, keep good order and ensure that people get taxis in the correct order.

Mr Speaker: We will vote now. Therefore, it is vital that there is a quorum in the House.

Amendment No 11 agreed to.

Amendment No 12 made: In page 5, line 37, leave out subsection (3). — [The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]

Clause 6, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 7 to 9 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 10 (Functions in relation to operator's licence authorising separate fares)

Amendment No 13 made: In page 6, line 27, at beginning insert "Subject to subsection (4A)". — [The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]

Amendment No 14 made: In page 6, line 38, leave out "subject to subsection (3)". — [The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]

3.30 pm

Amendment No 15 made: In page 7, line 6, leave out subsection (3). — [The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]

Amendment No 16 made: In page 7, line 13, after "(2)," insert "subject to subsection (4A)". — [The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]

Amendment No 17 made: In page 7, line 22, at end insert

"(4A) Subsections (1), (2) and (4) shall not apply, for or until such time or for such a period as may be prescribed, in relation to a person who is applying to be authorised under an operator's licence to operate a taxi service for or in respect of the carriage of passengers at separate fares and who—

(a) immediately before the coming into operation of this section, was the holder of a road service licence to provide a service on the same routes granted under the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967; or

(b) meets any other requirements that may be prescribed." — [The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]

Clause 10, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 11 (Appeals in relation to operator's licence authorising separate fares)

Amendment No 18 made: In page 7, line 24, after "2(8)" insert "or (12)". — [The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]

Amendment No 19 made: In page 7, line 27, leave out "in writing". — [The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]

Amendment No 20 made: In page 7, line 42, leave out "in writing". — [The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]

Amendment No 21 made: In page 8, line 1, after "2(8)" insert "or (12)". — [The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]

Amendment No 22 made: In page 8, line 4, leave out subsection (6). — [The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]

Clause 11, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 12 (Requirement for taxi licence)

Amendment No 23 made: In page 8, line 20, leave out subsection (5). — [The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]

Clause 12, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 13 (Taxi licences)

Amendment No 24 made: In page 9, line 7, leave out from “appeal” to end of line 8 and insert

“by notice appeal to the Department against”. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Amendment No 25 made: In page 9, line 13, at end insert

“(9) The time within which a person may bring such an appeal is 21 days from the date on which the notice of the decision appealed against is served on the person.

(10) On an appeal under subsection (8), the Department may decide to—

(a) confirm, reverse or vary the decision; or

(b) approve, revoke or vary the condition,

(as the case may be) as it thinks fit.

(11) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (10), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the grounds of the decision.

(12) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (10) may appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against any such decision.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Clause 13, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 14 (Duties of owners of licensed taxis)

Amendment No 26 made: In page 9, line 34, leave out from “and” to end of line 35. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Clause 14, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 15 (Identification of licensed vehicles)

Amendment No 27 made: In page 10, line 10, leave out subsection (6). — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Clause 15, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 16 (Regulation of fares, etc.)

Amendment No 28 made: In page 10, line 26, at end insert

“(2A) Before the Department makes any regulations under this section, it shall take into consideration any recommendations made by the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Amendment No 29 made: In page 10, line 28, leave out from “and” to end of line 29. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Clause 16, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 17 (Display and publication, etc. of fares)

Amendment No 30 made: In page 11, line 2, leave out from “and” to end of line 3. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Clause 17, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 18 (Regulation of taximeters etc.)

Amendment No 31 made: In page 11, line 35, leave out subsection (9). — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Clause 18, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 19 (Taxis not to carry more than the prescribed number of persons)

Amendment No 32 made: In page 12, line 2, leave out from “and” to end of line 3. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Clause 19, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 20 (Regulations concerning taxis or use of taxis)

Amendment No 33 made: In page 12, line 19, at end insert

“(ca) providing for persons to manage, and regulating the management of, the use of places referred to in paragraph (a);” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Amendment No 34 made: In page 13, line 5, leave out from “and” to end of line 6. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Clause 20, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 21 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 22 (Requirement for taxi driver’s licence)

Amendment No 35 made: In page 15, line 34, leave out subsections (8) and (9). — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Clause 22, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 23 (Taxi driver’s licences)

Amendment No 36 made: In page 16, line 32, leave out from “appeal” to end of line 33 and insert

“by notice appeal to the Department against”. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Amendment No 37 made: In page 16, line 36, at end insert

“(9A) The time within which a person may bring such an appeal is 21 days from the date on which the notice of the decision appealed against is served on the person.

(9B) On an appeal under subsection (9), the Department may decide to—

(a) confirm, reverse or vary the decision; or

(b) approve, revoke or vary the condition,

(as the case may be) as it thinks fit.

(9C) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (9B), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the grounds of the decision.

(9D) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (9B) may appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against any such decision.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Clause 23, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 24 (Issue of driver’s badges etc.)

Amendment No 38 made: In page 17, line 26, leave out from “and” to end of line 28. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Clause 24, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 25 and 26 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 27 (Suspension, revocation and curtailment under section 26: procedure etc.)

Amendment No 39 made: In page 19, leave out lines 1 to 8 and insert

“(b) (subject to section 35), it shall direct in the notice when the suspension, revocation or curtailment is to take effect.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Amendment No 40 made: In page 19, line 9, leave out subsection (3) and insert

“(3) A licence suspended under this Act shall remain suspended until such time as the Department by notice directs that the licence is again in force.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Amendment No 41 made: In page 19, line 13, leave out

“appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction”

and insert

“by notice appeal to the Department”. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Amendment No 42 made: In page 19, line 14, at end insert

“(4A) The time within which a person may bring such an appeal is 21 days from the date on which the notice of the decision appealed against is served on the person.

(4B) On an appeal under subsection (4), the Department may decide to confirm, reverse or vary the decision as it thinks fit.

(4C) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (4B), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the grounds of the decision.

(4D) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (4B) may appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against any such decision.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Clause 27, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 28 (Variation of licence on request)

Amendment No 43 made: In page 19, line 41, leave out

“appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction”

and insert

“by notice appeal to the Department”. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Amendment No 44 made: In page 19, line 42, at end insert -

“(9) The time within which a person may bring such an appeal is 21 days from the date on which the notice of the decision appealed against is served on the person.

(10) On an appeal under subsection (8), the Department may decide to confirm, reverse or vary the decision as it thinks fit.

(11) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (10), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the grounds of the decision.

(12) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (10) may appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against any such decision.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Clause 28, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

3.45 pm

Clause 29 (Variation of operator’s licence by Department)

Amendment No 45 made: In page 20, leave out lines 15 to 20 and insert

“(b) (subject to section 35), it shall direct in the notice when the decision is to take effect.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Amendment No 46 made: In page 20, line 21, leave out

“appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction”

and insert

“by notice appeal to the Department”. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Amendment No 47 made: In page 20, line 22, at end insert

“(4A) The time within which a person may bring such an appeal is 21 days from the date on which the notice of the decision appealed against is served on the person.

(4B) On an appeal under subsection (4), the Department may decide to confirm, reverse or vary the decision as it thinks fit.

(4C) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (4B), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the grounds of the decision.

(4D) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (4B) may appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against any such decision.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).]*

Clause 29, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 30 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 31 (Production of documents)

Amendment No 48 made: In page 21, line 31, leave out from “and” to end of line 32. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Clause 31, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 32 (Return of licences, etc.)

Amendment No 49 made: In page 22, line 23, leave out subsection (7). — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Clause 32, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 33 and 34 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 35 (Effect of appeal on decision appealed against)

Amendment No 50 made: After clause 35 insert

“Regulations in respect of appeals

35A. The Department may by regulations make such further provision in respect of appeals under this Act as it considers necessary or expedient.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Clause 35, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 36 (Enforcement notices)

Amendment No 51 made: In page 24, line 2, leave out from “and” to end of line 3. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Amendment No 52 made: In page 24, line 14, leave out

“appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction”

and insert

“by notice appeal to the Department”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Amendment No 53 made: In page 24, line 14, at end insert

“(6A) On an appeal under this section, the Department may either cancel or affirm the notice, and if it affirms it, it may do so either in its original form or with such modifications as the Department may in the circumstances think fit.

(6B) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (6A), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the grounds of the decision.

(6C) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (6A) may, within 21 days of the notice being served under subsection (6B), appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Amendment No 54 made: In page 24, line 18, leave out “or with such” and insert

“, in its form as modified by the Department under subsection (6A) or with such other”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Clause 36, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 37 (Powers of entry)

Amendment No 55 made: In page 24, line 26, after “premises” insert “and any equipment”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Amendment No 56 made: In page 24, line 36, after second “premises” insert “and any equipment”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Clause 37, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 38 (Power to stop and examine licensed taxis)

Amendment No 57 made: In page 26, line 3, leave out from “and” to end of line 4. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Clause 38, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 39 to 41 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 42 (Taxi touts)

Amendment No 58 made: In page 28, line 10, leave out “20(2)(c)” and insert “20”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Amendment No 59 made: In page 28, line 11, leave out subsection (4). — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Clause 42, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 43 (False statements, forgery and power of seizure in connection with certain documents)

Amendment No 60 made: In page 28, line 36, leave out subsection (4). — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Clause 43, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 44 (Obstruction of authorised officers etc.)

Amendment No 61 made: In page 29, line 17, leave out from “and” to end of line 18. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Amendment No 62 made: In page 29, line 26, leave out from “and” to end of line 27. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Amendment No 63 made: In page 29, line 30, leave out from “and” to end of line 31. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Clause 44, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 45 to 47 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 48 (Access to information)

Amendment No 64 made: After clause 48 insert

“Publication of information

48A.—(1) The Department may publish, in such form and manner as it thinks appropriate, information in connection with the provisions of this Act.

(2) Before the Department publishes any such information under subsection (1), it shall take into consideration any recommendations made by the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Clause 48, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 49 to 51 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 52 (Restriction of application of other statutory provisions)

Amendment No 65 made: In page 31, line 3, at end insert

“(2A) Notwithstanding anything in subsection (2), for the purposes of section 14 of the Finance Act (Northern Ireland) 1966 (c. 21) an operator’s licence which authorises the licensed operator to operate a taxi service for or in respect of the carriage of passengers at separate fares shall be deemed to be a road service licence granted or deemed to have been granted under Part 2 of the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Clause 52, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 53 (Ancillary and transitional provisions etc)

Amendment No 66 made: In page 31, line 26, leave out subsection (4) and insert

“(4) Subsection (5) applies to byelaws made or having effect as if made under Article 65 of the 1981 Order which

(a) relate to taxis; and

(b) are in force immediately before the coming into operation of section 52(1).

(5) Notwithstanding anything in section 52(1)

(a) provisions of those byelaws which could have been included in an

order under Article 27A of the Road Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 shall have effect as if contained in such an order; and

(b) any other provisions of those byelaws shall have effect as if contained in regulations made under section 20.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Clause 53, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 54 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 55 (Interpretation)

Amendment No 67 made: In page 32, line 22, at end insert “‘notice’ means notice in writing;”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Clause 55, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 56 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 57 (Commencement)

Amendment No 68 made: Leave out clause 57 and insert

“Commencement

57. This Act (except sections 53 to 55, this section and section 58) shall come into operation on such day or days as the Department may by order appoint.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Clause 57, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 58 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 1 agreed to.

Schedule 2 (Minor and consequential amendments)

Amendment No 69 made: In page 38, line 23, after “taxi” insert

“(within the meaning of the Taxis Act (Northern Ireland) 2008)”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Amendment No 70 made: In page 38, line 39, at end insert

“4A. In section 37A (carrying of assistance dogs in private hire vehicles) —

(a) for ‘private hire vehicle’, each place it occurs, substitute ‘taxi’;

(b) in subsection (9)

(i) for the definition of “driver” substitute —

“‘driver’ means a person who holds a taxi driver’s licence granted under —

(a) Article 79A of the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1981; or

(b) section 23 of the Taxis Act (Northern Ireland) 2008;”;

(ii) after the definition of “assistance dog” insert —

“‘booking’ means a taxi booking within the meaning given by section 55(1) of the Taxis Act (Northern Ireland) 2008;”;

(iii) for the definition of “operator” substitute —

“‘operator’ means a person who holds an operator’s licence granted under section 2 of the Taxis Act (Northern Ireland) 2008;” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Mrs Foster: I beg to move amendment No 71: In page 39, line 29, after “charges),” insert “ —

(a) after the paragraph beginning ‘An offence under Article 19(1) or (3)’

insert —

‘An offence under Article 27A(2).’; and

(b)”.

At present, an anomaly exists whereby the Department for Regional Development is responsible for policy on the location of taxi ranks but my Department has responsibility for providing the necessary legislation. Clause 21 of the Bill removes that anomaly; in future, DRD will be responsible for both policy and legislation through the taxi regulation orders. This also creates the

opportunity for taxi attendants to enforce any parking infringements of the taxi regulation orders, at ranks and elsewhere. The amendment, as suggested by the Committee, provides the necessary link with DRD's Traffic Management (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 to make this happen. I agree with the amendment as we should utilise all available methods of enforcement.

4.00 pm

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I wish to raise the role of traffic attendants, on which this amendment touches and to which the Minister referred. The Committee sought clarification on the role of traffic attendants and thought that it would be useful if they were to enforce parking infringements by taxi drivers at ranks or elsewhere. The Committee voted on the matter, and it is good that that led to progress in the form of a minor consequential amendment to DRD legislation, which is welcomed by the Committee.

The Committee's working relationships with its officials and departmental officials have resulted in effective legislation, an increased number of amendments and strong positive scrutiny of the Bill. The product of those effective relationships is before the House today, and it is a useful example of how the scrutiny function of Committees, combined with a harmonious working relationship with the Department, can achieve much that is positive and tangible for the community.

Mrs Foster: I echo the words of the Chairperson of the Committee. Rather than cosiness for the sake of it, there was a good working relationship as the Committee worked through, scrutinised, and suggested necessary amendments to the Bill. Amendment 71 provides just one example of what can be done under devolution. I thank the Committee for its work over the course of 17 long meetings, and I thank departmental and Committee officials for all the work that they have done to bring the Bill to the House today.

Amendment No 71 agreed to.

Schedule 2, as amended, agreed to.

Schedule 3 (Repeals)

Amendment No 72 made: In page 40, line 8, at end insert

"The Road Traffic (Amendment) Article 6
(Northern Ireland) Order 1991 (NI 3) In Schedule 3, Part 2".
— [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Amendment No 73 made: In page 40, line 9, Leave out "paragraph 16(2)" and insert

"paragraphs 16(2) and 21A(2)". — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster).*]

Schedule 3, as amended, agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Taxis Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker. Members may take their ease for a few minutes.

Budget Bill

Final Stage

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

That the Budget Bill [NIA 10/07] do now pass.

I thank the Chairperson and the members of the Committee for Finance and Personnel for agreeing to the accelerated passage of the Budget Bill. The debates on the Bill have, at times, been interesting, robust and — for the most part — constructive. I thank Members for their contributions and interest.

Members have had various opportunities to raise wide-ranging issues of concern through the debates on the Supply resolution on 11 February 2008, the Second Stage of the Budget Bill on 12 February 2008, the debate on the Budget 2008-11 last month, as well as this brief debate. I suspect that most Members are talked out on financial issues.

As I said on 11 February 2008, as we enter the three-year Budget period, Members and the Committees have a key role in holding Departments and Ministers to account on the delivery of the identified efficiencies and on the delivery of quality public services through the allocated funding. I urge the Committees to probe, scrutinise and challenge their respective Departments — including my own — to improve the outcomes for the people of Northern Ireland.

The strategic context for budgetary spending plans for the next three years is the Programme for Government, particularly the priority given to promoting the growth of a dynamic, innovative and strong economy. Alongside that, I recognise the importance of delivering modern, high-quality and efficient public services, and a sustained level of investment to ensure that the right infrastructure is in place to support those goals.

In that context — and as we move into the first year of the Budget period — rather than acting as an opposition, Committees should constructively challenge and assist Ministers and Departments to ensure that taxpayers receive value for money. They should also monitor the progress that is being made towards the targets set out in the Programme for Government.

We should not wait until the end of our three-year Programme for Government and Budget to discover that the targets that have been set have not been fully achieved. From this moment on, Committees need to monitor performance diligently. I have consistently commended the Budget to the House; it is to the advantage of every section of our community. I resent the simple analysis that some people have attempted to put on it by attaching one label or another. On the one hand, the Budget seeks to grow our economy in order

to incentivise the business community and to build on the key drivers of the economy, while on the other hand, it puts considerably increased funds into improving our public services.

Dr Farry: I promise not to keep the House too long — especially after the marathon Consideration Stage of the Taxis Bill that preceded this debate. I congratulate the House on getting through the Bill so efficiently.

The Alliance Party has already made clear its concerns about the incoming Budget: there are flaws in some respects and grounds for questions and scepticism in others. However, the party will not force a Division on the issue. The party recognises that the debate is about the spring Supplementary Estimates in relation to last year's Budget and the 45% Vote on Account on the incoming financial year.

I want to return to some of the points that have been raised in previous discussions. The Minister of Finance and Personnel referred to labels and simplistic solutions. Although he was not staring at these Benches, I have no doubt that the Alliance Party was in his thoughts. Quite a lot of labels have been thrown at the Alliance Party about the assigning of different ideological motivations — most of them somewhat to the left of socialism. My party has sought to approach the Budget from a fundamentally liberal perspective, and the label that it will sign up to and stand by is that of liberalism, economic and social.

In general, the Alliance Party respects the right of the Minister and the Executive to set their Budget, because that is their role; they will do that by taking decisions on income and expenditure. Equally, the Alliance Party — which is not a part of the Executive — is perfectly within its rights to argue that things can be done differently, and that is what it has sought to do. The Alliance Party does not engage in opposition for opposition's sake. For example, it has just agreed the Taxis Bill. When my party feels that the Executive are right, it will say so. There will be times when the Alliance Party votes with different parties in line with different proposals. On this occasion, things can be done differently.

The Alliance Party has had an interesting exchange with the Minister on some of the views of different non-governmental organisations; I have quoted the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), Northern Ireland Community and Voluntary Association (NICVA) and the Economic Research Institute for Northern Ireland (ERINI). The Minister has acknowledged in written answers that all those organisations have made points about Budget priorities and the approach taken to local taxation. In doing so, the Minister stated clearly that he disagrees with some of the points that those organisations have made, which is fair enough; he has the right to do so. I do not necessarily agree

with all the points that those organisations have made; for example, I take a different view to the CBI over the issue of industrial derating. However, I have sought to point out that, politically, there are those — such as members of the Alliance Party — who take a different perspective, economically and socially, and it is healthy to voice those differences in a democratic society.

The Alliance Party has not produced an alternative, fully funded Budget. It does not have access to the resources to do so, and it does not have access to the Civil Service and detailed information on the subject. However, as an opposition, it has sought to raise questions and to present alternatives.

The Alliance Party has highlighted the issue of Deloitte's cost of the divide report, and although that has been progressed — which is welcome — it is concerned that the report does not play a major role in short-term considerations. The party will certainly take up the Minister's offer for a meeting on the subject — probably after Easter — when, no doubt, we will have a productive conversation.

The Alliance Party has tabled a no-day-named motion, through which we hope to give the House an opportunity to discuss those important issues in the near future.

4.15 pm

We are at one with the Minister of Finance and Personnel in recognising the importance of efficiency savings, although with perhaps a different emphasis. At times, the Executive seem to view efficiency savings as a matter of doing the same things for less money. For the Alliance Party, efficiency savings are about shifting resources from old priorities to new ones. Mental-health services are a clear example of an area to which resources must be reallocated from certain activities.

We disagreed with the freezing of the regional rate at 0%. We feel that a figure around the rate of inflation would be more responsible. Again, the Executive have the right to set the rate at that level, if they so wish.

We have sought to highlight areas of public service in which spending is deficient. Let us start with health spending, which will be £200 million behind the level of expenditure that is required to keep up with the rate of investment in health in the rest of the United Kingdom. Notwithstanding the increased investment in health in the Budget, the level is still insufficient to keep up with the rate of health spending elsewhere. We are all aware that health is becoming a more costly area of public policy.

Transport and the environment are other areas that the Alliance Party has sought to highlight. We will have to set our own spending and income plans if we get into Government, but, at this stage, we have sought to highlight areas in which we feel there are deficiencies.

We cannot address all areas of expenditure that we would like to address, given the resources that would become available under our plans; however, we would be able to make greater investments.

I wish to conclude by making two final points. First, we are concerned about the approach that has been taken to local taxation. We are concerned that we should not become locked into a financial straitjacket in which there is an expectation that services can be provided without raising taxes from the population of Northern Ireland. I am worried that the approach taken to the regional rate may be sending out that message. In future, when the Executive feel that they must raise more income from the population, they will have a greater mountain to climb in order to achieve that.

Secondly, there is a question about how the Budget interacts with the economy. In some respects the argument has been advanced that cutting public expenditure, or keeping increases to a minimum, helps the economy. It is a matter of shrinking the public sector in relation to the private sector. I agree with the Minister's objectives of trying to grow the economy in Northern Ireland. We need a bigger private sector in relation to the public sector, and we must tackle the productivity gap that exists between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. However, there is a valid argument that, in order to achieve those aims, one should invest resources in the drivers of the economy, such as transport infrastructure, skills or innovation, to name only three key areas. That is what the CBI was pointing out when it said that more investment in the economic drivers could be made, rather than cutting household taxation to the level that the Minister seeks.

Perhaps there should be more emphasis on business taxation. We disagree with the Minister's approach to industrial derating — it is an antiquated approach to supporting business — but reducing corporation tax has major attractions for business in Northern Ireland. There is a concern that, although the Varney Review ruled out lowering the corporation tax differential at this stage, if a lower differential were to be achieved in the future, there would be insufficient provision in the Budget to allow us to fund the gap in resources that would arise from it.

The Alliance Party is content that the Budget Bill should pass Final Stage. No doubt we will return to many of the topics that we have raised when, in June, the House debates the second Budget Bill, which will give full effect to the Budget.

Mr P Robinson: The Member for North Down is right to raise any questions and concerns, and I defend that right. I have sat too long on opposition Benches and know from my own experiences the difficulties in the role of opposition. The opposition has not the same

access to statistics or to the necessary policy levers to be able to challenge Government.

I urge the Member to continue raising the questions: it keeps Government on its toes, and that is what oppositions are for. However, Dr Farry should recognise the special system that we have in the Assembly. The strong Committee system provides resources that can form a basis for challenge to Government. He can use those facilities. The Finance and Personnel Committee has not only challenged Government, but, in many cases, raised issues which I have been happy to take on board. No one in the Department of Finance and Personnel believes that the sole font of wisdom lies in Craigantlet Buildings.

I defend the Member's right to raise questions and speak on these issues, and I am pleased that he does not intend to divide the House this evening. If he were, we might have difficulty producing a majority; however, if he were to win, there might be difficulties in financing Departments. That would not be in his interest.

I will touch on the main points that the Member has raised. He talked of doing things differently. However, it is not just about doing things differently: it is about doing them better. One can do things differently, but that is of no advantage to the people of Northern Ireland unless it represents an improvement. I have heard nothing in the Alliance Party's proposals that suggests that it proposes something better. I do not believe that the community in Northern Ireland thinks that the Alliance Party's proposal to tax and spend should be indulged. I do not believe that it is the view of the people that rates should be increased, considering the heavy burden that they have had to carry over the past five years, with a 60% increase in rates. I do not believe that a proposition that will raise £7 million in the next financial year is the way to go, considering the additional burden that it will put on the people of Northern Ireland — particularly in the light of the Executive's proposal for a 3% efficiency drive that will bring in, and free up for front-line services, £790 million. In my view, that is the way to go.

The Member frequently calls to his aid the CBI, as though it were supporting his party's position. That is most certainly not the case. He has disagreed with some of the policies of the CBI. I have said that the CBI is fundamentally wrong in wanting domestic rates to be increased but being content with a freeze on rates on commercial premises. People can make their own judgement as to the interest that the CBI might have in that. We can all disagree with individual policies.

I have met the CBI since I last spoke on financial issues in the House, and I assure the Member that it warmly supported the position adopted by the Executive in the Budget, but I heard no praise for the Alliance Party's proposals. Before the Member calls the CBI to

his aid again, he may want to have a chat with that organisation to see how much he has in common with it and how much support it has for his policies.

The Member raised two matters: one was the cost of division, the other health. I have cast out this worm on several occasions, but I am still waiting for someone to bite. I keep hearing about a meeting that the Alliance Party will have with me, but I still await a letter seeking it. I assure that party that I will speedily react.

I will even take a verbal request.

Mr Ford: Unless my memory is very much mistaken, the Minister was given that verbal request the last time we debated the issue.

Mr P Robinson: I am sure that my Department will be happy to take a verbal request, if that is all that I am going to get. I am happy to set up the meeting and discuss the issue. When we do discuss the issue, the Member will find no reticence on my part to salvage any possible additional finances out of savings that can be made from the removal of division in our society. As I have repeatedly pointed out, the big sums associated with the cost of division are largely in education, where an immediate or medium-term gain will not be made. None of that should stop us from trying to move in that direction. Successes can be achieved by using the funding that goes into policing and security, although that funding would not go into the Northern Ireland block grant. Funding for other areas, such as community centres and recreational facilities, go into the coffers of local government. I am happy to discuss all of those issues, and the Member will find that I am not applying the handbrake to any benefits that might be gained.

All Members recognise the critical role that is to be played by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. He deserves the support of the House in the difficult task that he faces. He must administer a budget of £4 billion, which is a significant amount of money. We have been able to secure flexibility for his budget, which will make it much simpler for him to do his task, and I am sure that he will use that flexibility. On top of that, he has the advantage of being able to use any additional savings that he can gain in the Department. However, I recognise that those savings will not take place in the early part of the comprehensive spending review period. I have no doubt that, if the Minister experiences difficulties, he will bring those to the Executive.

If one examines the allocations to health over previous years, one will see that this is the largest health budget that has been available to any Minister. It represents a larger chunk of the overall Northern Ireland block grant than any Health Minister has had before. I had hoped that the Member for North Down Dr Farry would have welcomed that.

Dr Farry referred to interaction with the rest of the economy. In my opening remarks, I said that growth of the economy is a priority. We intend to encourage the key drivers of the economy, including skills, innovation and infrastructure. Additional funding has been put into those areas, and the increases are greater for those Departments that are responsible for those areas. In itself, the Budget cannot provide growth: it can encourage growth, but it will be down to those Departments to produce the policies that will provide growth in the economy. Therefore, the burden lies with the appropriate Ministers.

This is a good Budget for Northern Ireland. The Executive and the Assembly have a responsibility to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. The Budget, the Programme for Government and the investment strategy give us the tools with which we can create a better standard of living for the people of Northern Ireland and improve and grow our economy. I hope that the Committees will play a full role in ensuring that Departments deliver in each of their areas of responsibility. It is the responsibility of Ministers to deliver, and it is the responsibility of the Committees to ensure that they do so.

Mr Speaker: Before the Question is put, I remind the House that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Budget Bill [NIA 10/07] do now pass.

4.30 pm

Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Businesses (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I beg to move

That the Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Businesses (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

The regulations are subject to the affirmative resolution procedure, as laid down in the parent legislation, the Employment (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. The regulations were laid in draft form on 24 January, and it is intended that they will come into operation on 6 April 2008.

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

The regulations amend the Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Businesses Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005. The 2005 regulations protect the interests of those who use the services of employment agencies and businesses, that is, work seekers and hirers, and put in place minimum standards that work seekers and hirers can expect, such as the provision of terms and conditions, restrictions on charging fees to work seekers, and proper handling of clients' moneys.

The Assembly recently debated the issue of agency workers, and I do not propose to cover the same ground today. However, I must say that the vast majority of employment agencies and businesses are reputable companies that treat work seekers fairly.

The private-recruitment sector has made a significant and positive contribution to our local economy. There are undoubted benefits, both for employers and workers who avail themselves of the services provided by the private-recruitment sector. Employers benefit from the flexibility that agency workers bring to their businesses, particularly during fluctuations in demand. Moreover, agency work allows companies to increase production on a temporary basis before committing permanently to expansion.

Furthermore, agency workers benefit from the flexibility of such work if, for example, they have to balance work with other responsibilities. For some, agency work is a gateway to permanent work.

All Members of the Assembly are, however, aware of cases in which disreputable agencies have broken the law. If approved, the regulations will provide additional protections for vulnerable work seekers by addressing known bad practices, without imposing excessive regulatory burdens on the reputable side of the sector.

Agency workers are currently covered by many of the same rights as permanent employees, including the right not to be discriminated against, to be paid at least the national minimum wage, to paid holiday entitlement, and to receive statutory maternity and paternity pay. However, there is a need for additional protections for vulnerable workers.

In summary, the amending regulations will provide for workers to be given a clear right to withdraw from accommodation, transport or other paid-for services provided by an agency, without suffering any detriment. Furthermore, they provide for workers to receive a written statement of their right to withdraw from those services.

There will be a notice period of five working days for a right to withdraw from extra services, with the exception of accommodation, which will require a notice period of 10 working days.

It is already an offence to make an offer of a job conditional on a worker's paying for other services; however, these measures will go a step further by giving agency workers the right to withdraw from such services without suffering detriment. In the main, the measures are likely to benefit migrant workers, who may have signed up for services provided by agencies. It will be a criminal offence for an agency not to comply with these measures, and, in serious cases, my Department can prosecute agencies that are breach of the law in the Magistrates' Courts.

In the most severe cases, the Department can apply to an industrial tribunal to prohibit an individual from operating an employment agency for up to 10 years.

In addition, the amending regulations will ban entertainment and modelling agencies from taking any fee for work-finding services on the day of a casting session and from offering to include the work seeker's details in a publication. I intend that, in those circumstances, work seekers will be given a seven-day cooling-off period in which to change their minds. That is another area in which work seekers and workers are seen as vulnerable, because many of them are under 18. Also, modelling and entertainment agencies are the only agencies that can charge work seekers a fee for work-finding services, which means that additional safeguards are necessary.

One point of clarification and two minor, miscellaneous changes to the 2005 regulations are also proposed. Regulation 7 will clarify the fact that the prohibition on an employment agency's disclosing information about a work seeker does not apply when the agency has received information that a worker whom it has supplied may be unsuitable. The 2005 regulations make provision for work seekers who are incorporated — that is, they are limited companies — to opt out of the regulations. Regulation 8 will require an agency to inform a hirer if an incorporated work seeker supplied

by that agency has opted out of the regulations. Regulation 9 will list clothes, hair and make-up stylists as part of the entertainment and modelling sector, wherein agencies are permitted to charge a fee for work-finding services.

Finally, as a deregulatory measure, it is proposed to ease the administrative burden on employment businesses in respect of repeat short-term assignments. In those circumstances, only basic information, such as the identity of the hirer, will have to be provided to the work seeker. That change will have no effect on the protection of agency workers. Before agencies can take advantage of that new measure, they must first provide the worker and the hirer with all the essential information — such as rate of pay, etc — in writing, with the agency's terms and conditions.

In addition, my Department is working on guidance to assist vulnerable work seekers and workers. That includes guidance to be printed and distributed to migrant workers before they leave their home countries. Those publications are being developed by officials in my Department, in conjunction with Whitehall's Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, and will provide advice on agency workers' entitlements under employment law, as well as on issues such as the national minimum wage and the cost of living in the United Kingdom. Those measures were mentioned on numerous occasions during the debate on 15 January, so I know that several Members feel strongly about them.

There is also advice for drivers, driver-hire agencies and the companies that use them, warning of the dangers of coercing or colluding with drivers to work excessive hours. There is also advice for would-be actors and models on their rights when they sign up with an entertainment or modelling agency. With regard to the former group — drivers — some concern was expressed in the House in November, when a company went into receivership, that such practices were taking place. I do not know whether that was the case, but I know that Members were concerned that we should have some sense of, and control over, those matters.

This is a modest, targeted package of proposals that is designed to provide additional protections for vulnerable work seekers while not unduly adding to the regulatory burden on the private-recruitment sector. In fact, reputable agencies will benefit from the regulations because they will not be unfairly disadvantaged in comparison with agencies that mistreat workers or abuse the law in order to make money.

I am grateful to the Committee for Employment and Learning for its detailed scrutiny of the policy proposals and the regulations. At its meeting on 6 February, the Committee recommended that the regulations be approved by the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a

LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I support the motion. As the Minister highlighted, the Committee unanimously supported the regulations.

This is an important issue, and it has been of interest to all Members, not just those on the Committee for Employment and Learning. On 15 January, a motion on agency workers tabled by Mitchel McLaughlin generated significant interest from all parties. I thank the Minister and his officials for their consultation with the Committee on this important statutory rule. On 9 January, departmental officials fully briefed the Committee on the secondary legislation and on the relevant wider consultation.

The purpose of the statutory rule is to increase the protection afforded to people seeking employment. Where an employment agency makes provision for accommodation or transport, it also provides protection for fee-charging practices of agencies in the entertainment and modelling sector. Some Members may consider that the subordinate legislation is limited in its scope. However, the issue of linking employment to other components, such as transport and accommodation, is a controversial area that is open to abuse. It is essential that workers do not suffer any detriment with regard to those employment add-ons. It is important that the modelling and entertainment industries be given particular attention in the legislation, as they employ potentially vulnerable young women.

The competitiveness of our local economy should be based on a skilled and educated workforce that has the opportunity to learn and to adapt to fast-changing economic circumstances. Exploitation of agency employees should not be used as an excuse for flexibility in the workplace. There are many issues with respect to agency workers, and I am sure that Members will address those in future. Nevertheless, the regulations can only strengthen the position of agency workers, and that should be welcomed. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the Minister's statement and the proposed regulations. Anything that creates higher standards and additional protections is to be welcomed. In the past two weeks, there was a debate in the Dáil on the protection of agency and immigrant workers. Moreover, in the past few days, a private Members' Bill received support in the House of Commons. There may be some merit in taking forward those issues not only with the North/South Ministerial Council, but with the British-Irish Council, because legislatures in other parts of these islands are touching on the very issues that we touch on today.

The SDLP sees the issue as a work in progress. At Westminster, the British Prime Minister had to intervene on a Private Members' Bill giving new rights to agency workers. That highlights the importance of the issue.

Mindful of what may or may not happen at Westminster, we would like further protections and enhancements for agency workers. Although there was consensus on the issue some weeks ago following a debate in the Assembly, the SDLP was close to forcing a division, as we felt that the motion as amended was in danger of not going far enough to protect agency workers. Nonetheless, the SDLP welcomes the regulations. They go some way further in protecting workers, and that can only be a welcome development.

4.45 pm

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Committee Chairperson for her comments, and I repeat my thanks to the Committee for its studious attention to the regulations. It is important that we work together on these matters to see whether it is possible to improve and speed the passage of important regulations.

I also note the Chairperson's reference to the debate in the Assembly on 15 January. It is fair to say that widespread concern was expressed on all sides of the House on that occasion about a number of issues, and several Members have raised similar issues today. One Member gave the example of a house that is being occupied by agency workers who are being charged an enormous rent. There are two Members from East Antrim in the Chamber at present, and I assume that neither of them own the property referred to — but perhaps they do. However, such issues can be dealt with through these regulations, which will give workers the right to receive written confirmation of their rights and the right to withdraw from their accommodation with 10 working days notice and without any detriment to their well-being. That is now a legal right that Members on all sides of the House will welcome.

Several other matters were raised by Members in the debates, and those raised by Mr Spratt are being pursued. It is, therefore, clear that Members are concerned about issues relating to agency workers.

Mr Attwood referred to recent debates in the Dáil and in Westminster. I am aware of both of those debates, and my Department is following them closely. We noticed the involvement of the Member for Foyle in the debate at Westminster, because we keep abreast of such debates.

I am aware of the strength of feeling that exists. However, I do not want to give the impression that I will be rushing to introduce proposals based on those discussions to the Chamber, but we will look closely and monitor what happens. The arguments and language being used in both jurisdictions are similar. We are all trying to stop people being exploited; it is not a difficult concept to grasp.

Problems relating to agency workers are not confined to Ireland or the United Kingdom; they are European

issues. However, the whole thing has stalled because of differences of opinion in member states. There are collective agreements in some European countries that circumvent the rights of agency workers. In fact, people often end up being paid below the appropriate level. There is, therefore, a range of complicated issues to be considered.

We must be careful, because, if we overreact, we will create an anti-competitive position for ourselves and make our labour market less flexible, which is not in the interests of employers nor workers.

The Department is following the debates in the Dáil and Westminster closely, and the outcomes in those jurisdictions will inform the Executive and the Committee regarding any further proposals that we might wish to make. I understand that the next Presidency of the Council of the European Union — which, I think, will be France and which will begin in July — wants to make a drive on this issue, and it will be interesting to see if that manifests itself in any agreement.

I thank Members for their contributions, and I am pleased that we have broad support for the regulations.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Businesses (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

Pensions Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

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

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of provisions of the Pensions Bill as introduced in the House of Commons dealing with the Pensions Regulator Tribunal, information relating to private pensions policy and retirement planning, the power to establish a pension scheme, the remit of the Personal Accounts Delivery Authority, the Pension Protection Fund and the Fraud Compensation Fund; and of amendments to that Bill introducing new provisions to the Financial Assistance Scheme.

Mr Durkan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Some colleagues and I tabled an amendment to the motion, not to delete or remove any part of it, but to add a specific point to the end that might remove the anomaly under the financial assistance scheme that particularly affects people in Northern Ireland who are members of the Desmond and Sons Ltd pension scheme. The Speaker has seen fit not to allow that amendment, and I would like an explanation of that decision. Given that some Members are encouraging English MPs to table amendments to the Pensions Bill in Westminster in order to deal with that matter, it seems strange that Members of this House are not allowed to address the issue, which affects people in Northern Ireland more than anywhere else.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Decisions about the selection of amendments are a matter for the Speaker and, by convention, it is not appropriate to give reasons for accepting or rejecting amendments to the motion. Of course, during the debate, the Member may refer to the points that his amendment would have addressed.

Ms Ritchie: The legislative consent motion deals with the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Pensions Bill, as introduced to the House of Commons on 5 December 2007, which deals with the pension regulator tribunal, in clause 36; information relating to private-pensions policy and retirement planning, in clause 43; the power to establish a pension scheme, in Part 1, chapter 4; the proposed personal accounts delivery authority, in Part 1, chapter 5; the pension protection fund in clauses 95 and 98; the fraud compensation fund in clause 98; and amendments to the Pensions Bill that deal with the financial assistance scheme.

The Bill includes measures to progress proposals set out in the White Paper, ‘Personal accounts: a new way to save’, which was published in December 2006. In due course, I will propose corresponding Northern Ireland legislation. However, there are several of the Bill’s provisions that should be extended to Northern Ireland, because they are in Northern Ireland people’s interests and because the Bill will amend Westminster legislation that already covers Northern Ireland.

With respect to the power to establish a pension scheme, the primary aim of the Bill is to enable people who do not save for retirement to contribute to a low-cost portable pension scheme. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will be empowered to establish a scheme and provide for its administration and management, and, from 2012, the proposed personal account scheme will extend the benefits of private saving to those people on low or moderate incomes who do not have access to a good-quality employer-sponsored pension scheme. The scheme will complement, rather than replace, existing employer provision, and will be set up as a trust. A trustee corporation will be established to act in the interests of scheme members.

Personal accounts will be delivered using private-sector expertise working within a remit set by Government. The scheme will act as a large multi-employer pension scheme. The advantage of that model is that the scheme will have significant investment power and charges can be kept to a minimum. A separate scheme for Northern Ireland would operate on a much smaller scale, and there are questions about its sustainability. It is also likely that charges to cover running costs would be higher and the scheme's investment power significantly smaller, and that would directly affect the amounts which savers would ultimately receive. Extending the scheme to Northern Ireland will give people here the same rights of access to it and the same benefits that are enjoyed by people in England, Scotland and Wales.

The Bill contains amendments to Westminster legislation that already extends to Northern Ireland. For example, the Personal Accounts Delivery Authority was established in 2007 by the Pensions Act 2004 and operates on a UK-wide basis, which is consistent with other bodies in the pensions field, such as the Pensions Regulator and the pension protection fund. The Personal Accounts Delivery Authority acts in an advisory capacity, preparing for the establishment of the personal accounts scheme. The Bill will extend the authority's remit and see it move to undertaking the executive and contracting work required to prepare for the introduction of the scheme. As the authority already operates on a UK-wide basis, it is necessary for the proposed amendments to be of a UK-wide extent.

The financial assistance scheme was established on a UK-wide basis by the Pensions Act 2004, and its functions are the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. The scheme offers financial help to some people who lost their savings as a result of the collapse of employer-sponsored pension schemes and who are not covered by the pension protection fund. Following the Young Report into ways of generating additional value from failed pension schemes, the financial assistance scheme will be extended and improvements will be introduced. For example, scheme members will

be guaranteed 90% of their accrued pension instead of the present 80%. That will be subject to a cap of £26,000.

Although many of the changes can be made by subordinate legislation, the Bill will enable the financial assistance scheme to cover more people. Further amendments are expected during the Bill's passage through the House of Lords. In order to ensure that people here benefit from the enhancement of the financial assistance scheme, the amendments must be of UK-wide extent.

The Bill contains amendments to the Pensions Act 2004 and the Social Security Act 1998. The amendments will extend the remit of the Pensions Regulator tribunal to provide the right of appeal against determinations of the Pensions Regulator relating to the personal accounts scheme; extend existing provision regarding the use and supply of information for private pensions policy and retirement planning to cover information held by the Pensions Regulator and to include the personal accounts scheme; and provide for payments in respect of pension compensation, sharing on divorce and other similar matters to be made from the pension protection fund. Coincidentally, the Bill will introduce compensation sharing to bring compensation payments into line with rules on pension sharing. The amendments will also provide for interest charged for the late payment of the pension protection levy to be paid by the pension protection fund and will provide for interest charged for the late payment of the fraud compensation levy to be paid into the fraud compensation fund.

The provisions to be amended already extend to Northern Ireland. It is necessary, therefore, for those amendments to be of a UK-wide extent. As pensions are a transferred matter under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the approval of the Assembly is required for including those issues in the Westminster Pensions Bill.

My party colleague the Member for Foyle Mr Durkan wrote to me about a particular matter that he raised in another place, and I wish to provide him with some information.

The Desmonds' pension scheme is one of a small number of pension schemes that falls between the Pension Protection Fund and the financial assistance scheme. The employer became insolvent too early to qualify for the Pension Protection Fund, but the winding up of the pension scheme was delayed until after April 2005, and the scheme is ineligible for help under the financial assistance scheme. However, we must not forget that people in both Great Britain and Northern Ireland are members of the Desmonds' scheme, and my officials have worked strenuously with their counterparts in the Department for Work and Pensions to find a solution to this problem because we realise their particular difficulties.

5.00 pm

It would be unfortunate if the positive steps taken to provide financial support to scheme members who find themselves with reduced pensions were undermined by a small number of schemes that have unintentionally fallen through the cracks. So, in that context, and on foot of representations from my colleague Mr Durkan, I also wrote to the Minister of State for Pensions Reform, Mike O'Brien, in support of the work to resolve that unfortunate situation. I know that my colleague has already talked to the Minister of State about that issue.

The financial assistance scheme was set up under Westminster legislation, and, as I said earlier, it operates on a UK-wide basis. Its functions are the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Any extension of the scheme to cater for circumstances such as those involving the Desmonds' scheme would, as the Member knows, be carried by Westminster legislation extending to Northern Ireland. Should the Westminster Bill amend the financial assistance scheme to cater for the Desmonds' scheme and other similar schemes, I believe that the wording of the motion would allow for such extensions. I am hopeful that, in such circumstances, there could be — and will be — a satisfactory resolution to this situation. Like the Member, I hope that there can be good news for the people who worked for Desmonds'.

In conclusion, at their meetings of 18 December 2007 and 13 February 2008, the Executive endorsed proposals for a legislative consent motion. I have also spoken to the Minister of State, Mike O'Brien, about these particular issues. The Social Development Committee also considered the proposals, at its meetings on 13 December 2007 and 7 February 2008, and indicated its support for the motion. I thank the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Hilditch, and the Committee for that. I trust that Members will agree that these amendments are both necessary and in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): The Westminster Pensions Bill includes provision to establish a personal accounts scheme, extend the remit of the Personal Accounts Delivery Authority and make amendments to provisions of Westminster Acts that deal with transferred matters that are already extended to Northern Ireland.

The Bill is part of an overall pension reform package. An integral part of the reform package is the aim to introduce a simple low-cost system of personal accounts for those who currently do not save for retirement or do not have access to an occupational pension scheme. The Bill deals with the setting up of the personal accounts scheme as regards its design, governance and funding. The establishment of a separate scheme for Northern Ireland would bring all sorts of financial implications,

and, as the Minister has rightly said, because a Northern Ireland scheme would operate on a smaller scale, there would be a question mark over its sustainability. Furthermore, the investment power of a separate Northern Ireland scheme would be significantly less than that of one which operates on a UK-wide basis.

The Pensions Act 2007 established the Personal Accounts Delivery Authority to act in an advisory capacity on the detailed design of personal accounts. The authority already operates on a UK-wide basis, and the Bill will extend its remit in relation to its functions and how it operates. The Committee warmly welcomes the extension of the financial assistance scheme to help those who have lost their savings when an employer-sponsored pension scheme has collapsed.

The scheme is being extended so that members will be guaranteed, as the Minister said, 90% of their accrued pension at the date on which the scheme began to wind up; payment of assistance derived from pension accrued post-1997; and payment of assistance from each scheme's normal retirement age. Furthermore, people who are unable to work because of ill health will be able to apply for early access to payments; members will be able to draw on a tax-free lump sum if their share of the funds allows it; and assistance will be paid to members of schemes that wound up underfunded, where the employer is still solvent.

The extension has been seen as a real victory for those who campaigned for it. Not only does it mean security for individuals, but it also means security in retirement for their families.

The Committee for Social Development supports the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Pensions Bill as introduced in the House of Commons.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Organisations that represent older people, such as Help the Aged and Age Concern, have welcomed the Pensions Bill, which is seen as a positive package of reform that will change the face of retirement saving, and finally make pension saving worthwhile for the majority. The Bill will also give many women access to a decent pension for the first time.

It is essential that people benefit from saving. Good-quality information and advice about pensions and savings should be available to everyone. The interaction between means-tested benefits and personal accounts should be considered carefully.

An adequately funded, generic, financial advice service should be established to help individuals make financial decisions in general, including decisions about retirement planning. Ideally, state pensions would be set at a higher rate so that fewer people are drawn into means-testing. People's existing rights to various elements of the state pension — specifically

State Earnings Related Pension Scheme (SERPS) and graduated retirement benefit — will be consolidated.

The Bill will ensure the entitlement to basic state pension for women and carers by reducing to 30 the number of qualifying years.

Unfortunately, however, there is significant complexity in the pension system, which contributes to the continuing problem of low uptake of pension credit and other benefits amongst pensioners. Action is required to address that issue to ensure that pensioners who are eligible for benefits are identified and the appropriate assistance provided to ensure that they receive those benefits. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Durkan: Like other Members, I welcome this legislative consent motion as it will ensure that the Assembly supports the extension of key parts of the Pensions Bill to Northern Ireland.

The Pensions Bill has many positive aspects, including the fact that it will seal the benefits of the topping-up of the financial assistance scheme, which was long overdue, and for which trade unions and pensioner interest groups campaigned vigorously. It is to the credit of the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and the current Minister of State for Pensions Reform, Mike O'Brien, that that was achieved.

The Bill has other welcome aspects, including the future pensions regime, which will make matters more comprehensible, accessible and workable in the future. However, there is one outstanding anomaly that affects a key group of pensioners in Northern Ireland who are members of the Desmond and Sons pension and life assurance scheme. Although many of those affected are in my own constituency of Foyle, membership is not confined to that area.

As the Minister reflected, those people have been caught in a particular calendar warp, which was not intended when Parliament first legislated on the issue. At that time, the Government believed that all schemes would be covered by the pension protection fund or the financial assistance scheme.

However, because of the calendar warp, and because the date of insolvency was before 6 April 2005, and the formal wind-up was after 6 April 2005, members of the Desmond and Sons scheme find themselves, along with only two other known schemes, denied the benefits of either the pension protection fund or the financial assistance scheme.

From a number of meetings that I had with the Minister of State for Pensions and the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about the issue, I had believed that the matter might be resolved by secondary legislation.

However, it is now clear that it can be dealt with only by primary legislation, which will, in effect,

necessitate a further amendment to the Pensions Bill that is going through Westminster. Only last week, as MP for Foyle, I managed to persuade another Member of Parliament to table an amendment at the Committee Stage of the Bill. It covered the pension scheme at Desmonds' and the schemes at Stanley Press Equipment Ltd and Pinney's, both of which affect many fewer people. The amendment would have removed the anomaly and admitted those companies to the financial assistance scheme. However, the mechanism of parliamentary procedure meant that the amendment was withdrawn when the Minister promised further consideration of the matter.

I hope that I will have the support of MPs from Northern Ireland, as I have of MPs from elsewhere, when I table an amendment at Report Stage to try to address the issue. However, it will be difficult to persuade the Speaker at Westminster to select that amendment. That is why I am disappointed that the Assembly could not accommodate an amendment to specifically address the Desmonds' issue. To have been able to say that the legislative consent motion in the Assembly referred specifically to the matter would have provided wind assistance at Westminster. However, the SDLP will take any other chances to address the matter. My colleagues and I tabled the amendment as a probing amendment, and I am glad that the Minister had indicated that the final line of her motion, dealing with amendments to the financial assistance scheme, could encompass other, subsequent amendments. I take some comfort from the Minister's assurance.

It is an important issue, because the Desmonds' scheme has 348 members — many more than the other two schemes — and there have been significant cuts to those members' pensions. It is not a theoretical problem or a problem in waiting for those yet to reach pensionable age. It is a real problem for people now who, through no fault of their own, are being denied pensions that they earned, that they paid for, to which they are entitled and which they had been receiving. It is worthwhile for the Assembly to make it clear, in everything that is said in relation to the Pensions Bill, that it would welcome a resolution to that issue.

In another place, I will make every effort possible to ensure that that happens. However, I reserve the right to return to the Assembly, with colleagues, to table a specific motion to ensure success in gaining favour with the Speaker and other MPs in Westminster to resolve the issue. I believe that the Minister of State for Pensions Reform is sympathetic. Obviously, there are particular issues that he needs to deal with, but he has told me that he would welcome any positive pressure that can be brought to bear. I want to use today to amplify that positive pressure.

Ms Ritchie: I thank Members for their contributions. I am grateful to Mr Hilditch for offering support on

behalf of the Committee for Social Development, and I appreciate the positive manner in which the Committee dealt with the proposals for the legislative consent motion.

I noted Mr Brady's comments, and I will consider them when I introduce corresponding legislation for Northern Ireland.

I commend Mr Durkan for his efforts on behalf of the members of the Desmonds' scheme, and I hope that I have been able to reassure him of my commitment to working with the Minister of State for Pensions Reform, Mike O'Brien, to seek a satisfactory resolution. On foot of the correspondence that I have sent, I will continue to pursue this issue, which directly affects several residents of Northern Ireland. It is my duty and responsibility to exert as much pressure as possible to obtain a satisfactory outcome.

I reiterate that the Department is content that the wording of the motion is such as to enable any amendment that relates to Desmonds' to apply in Northern Ireland. Notwithstanding that, I hope for an acceptable resolution, and I will continue to pursue the matter with the Minister of State for Pensions Reform.

I hope that I have answered all the issues that Members raised, and, if not, I will write to the Members concerned. Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank you for your forbearance, and I thank Members for their contributions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of provisions of the Pensions Bill as introduced in the House of Commons dealing with the Pensions Regulator Tribunal, information relating to private pensions policy and retirement planning, the power to establish a pension scheme, the remit of the Personal Accounts Delivery Authority, the Pension Protection Fund and the Fraud Compensation Fund; and of amendments to that Bill introducing new provisions to the Financial Assistance Scheme.

Motion made:

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

5.15 pm

ADJOURNMENT

Preschool Educational Provision in the Lagan Valley Constituency

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak, Members who wish to speak will have eight minutes and the Minister will have 10 minutes.

Mr Donaldson: I welcome the opportunity to raise the issue of preschool educational provision in the Lagan Valley constituency, which I have been privileged to represent for almost 12 years.

Education is a major source of debate and is important to many people in Northern Ireland, not least in the area that I represent, where parents, particularly those who have children who are entering the primary-school system, are anxious that their children achieve their best. In my new position as a junior Minister, I have responsibility for children and young people. I look forward to working with the Department of Education to address issues that relate to our strategy for children and young people. Preschool education is a vital part of that strategy and is crucial to the development of a first-class education system in Northern Ireland.

I acknowledge that the Department of Education has been generous to the Lagan Valley constituency in preschool provision since 1997. Most of the children in the constituency have access to preschool education. However, there are significant pockets of the constituency where there are children who are significantly disadvantaged because they do not have access to preschool provision. That matter must be addressed.

A programme of investment in young children up to the age of six is required. James Heckman, winner of the 2000 Nobel Prize for Economics, has said:

"The first six years of a child's life are crucial in terms of their social and cognitive development, ironically however this is the time when the least funding is made available."

Although there has been a marked increase in the funding for preschool provision in Northern Ireland, as I have indicated, there are some gaps that must be addressed. Although my remarks are confined to preschool education, there are other areas that affect our younger children that I want to address in my new role to ensure that they get the best start in life.

I draw the Minister of Education's attention to one of the most beautiful parts of my constituency — the

Dromara hills. The Minister will be familiar with the area because the constituency of South Down borders Lagan Valley around Finnis. There is a polling station at St Michael's Primary School in Finnis, where the ballot boxes are divided between Lagan Valley and South Down. That is the interface between the two constituencies. A few miles from St Michael's Primary School is Fair Hill Primary School, which is one of the most blessed schools in Northern Ireland because of the magnificent view that it has.

There is a beautiful view out over the Lagan valley all the way down to Belfast, with the Dromara hills as the backdrop. Fair Hill is therefore an appropriate name for the school.

The school has an excellent leadership. The principal, Cynthia Clingham, her staff, the parent-teacher association, the parents themselves, and everyone who is involved, make a community contribution, and the school is right at the heart of the community. The school has been expanding to the point where the Southern Education and Library Board is hoping to introduce a development proposal for an additional classroom to accommodate the extra children. Included in that development proposal is a nursery unit for the school.

As the Minister will know from her own constituency experience, the Dromara hills are home to a wide and scattered rural community. The village of Kinallen, where Fair Hill Primary School is located, is at the heart of that community. However, Fair Hill Primary School needs that nursery unit. I represent parents who live in the Kinallen area who have to travel six miles each day to access preschool educational provision, mainly in the town of Dromore. Sometimes those parents obtain places for their children in the preschool playgroup in Dromara Primary School. That excellent playgroup is under the leadership of Violet Woods and her team, and Stanley Poots, the school principal. However, it is wrong that the parents in the Kinallen and Waringsford areas have to take their children six or seven miles — which is just one leg of the journey — to a playgroup. Those parents make that journey four times a day, resulting in a 24- or 25-mile round trip just to place their children in a preschool facility, even though an excellent primary school in their local community is crying out for a nursery unit.

In 2007-08, the primary 1 intake for Fair Hill Primary School was 40 pupils, which is quite remarkable for a rural primary school of that nature. The school has already 36 potential pupils registered for 2008-09, and 34 potential pupils for 2009-10. It is a successful school, and I have no doubt about its future. There is no question mark over the school. Therefore, when the Minister receives the development proposal, I urge her to consider it favourably and act with expediency to introduce it so that approval can be granted and Fair Hill Primary School can proceed with establishing its

nursery unit. It will take several months to get planning permission for that unit, but we hope to have it up and running as soon as possible.

I will now move across the Lagan valley to Moira on the other side of the valley. The Minister knows that she and I have corresponded on development proposal 176 for a preschool nursery unit at Moira Primary School. Indeed, that development proposal was first published in September 2003 as development proposal 165. It was placed on hold pending the completion of the Department's review of preschool provision in the Moira area.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board initiated the current development proposal 176 in October 2006. I understand that all stages of that proposal are now completed and that it is awaiting a ministerial decision. Moira is one of the significant growth areas in the Lagan Valley constituency. Its population has at least tripled over the past 15 to 20 years. The school is full and its prospects are excellent. I see no good reason why Moira Primary School should not have a nursery unit. It is in a growth area, and Moira Primary School is by far the largest primary school in the locality. I urge the Minister to please make a decision on development proposal 176 as soon as possible in order to end the uncertainty.

Parents are asking me and my colleagues from Lagan Valley when they will hear a decision on the nursery unit at Moira Primary School. There is no good reason for holding back that decision any longer. A strong case has been made for the unit, and I urge the Minister to respond to the development proposal in the affirmative.

St Colman's Primary School in Lambeg, on the edge of Lisburn, has received approval for a new school building. Both the South Eastern Education and Library Board and the CCMS have supported St Colman's in its quest to have a preschool nursery unit incorporated into the new school. That area is one of significant growth in the Lagan Valley constituency. St Colman's is an excellent school, thanks to its staff, its board of governors and its principal, Gerry McVeigh, and it provides a high standard of education. Again, I urge the Minister to revisit her decision to refuse the incorporation of a preschool unit in the new school building for St Colman's Primary School, Lambeg.

A little further down the road towards Belfast is Seymour Hill. That area has been socially deprived over many years, sadly, because of its location. It straddles two electoral wards: Lambeg and Seymour Hill. The indices of social deprivation are based on electoral wards, and, because the Seymour Hill and Conway estates are spread across two electoral wards, the social deprivation levels are masked by the demographics of the wider area. That is why Seymour Hill has lost out.

Currently, the preschool playgroup that is associated with Seymour Hill Primary School has funding issues. We would like the playgroup and Seymour Hill Primary School to be given greater support in recognition of the high levels of social deprivation in that area. It is interesting that the Minister for Social Development has recently designated Seymour Hill as a priority area and is examining ways in which to find additional funding.

I ask the Minister of Education to work with her colleague the Minister for Social Development to ascertain whether some of that funding could be given to preschool educational provision. Funding is required to support the playgroup, to provide additional funded places and to address its accommodation needs, but it is also required for homework clubs, etc. The Minister mentioned homework clubs in a meeting that we attended today. In fact, that was my first meeting as a Minister. I ask the Minister of Education to look again at the pattern of preschool educational provision in the Dunmurry area, with particular reference to Seymour Hill and Conway.

Some of my colleagues from Lagan Valley wish to contribute to the debate. We recognise that changes in education are coming. We recognise that, following the recommendations of the Bain Report, we will be looking at the rationalisation of the schools estate, the possible amalgamation of small schools, and so on. The education sector in Lisburn has indicated its willingness to engage positively in those issues. However, by the same token, it is important that the Minister recognises where there are gaps in educational provision — not least in preschool education.

The early years are crucial in a child's educational development. I see no good reason why children who live in villages, such as Kinallen, Waringsford, or Moira, should not have the same access to preschool education in their local communities, at their local schools, as the children who live in Lisburn or in other parts of my constituency. Equally, where a new school is being built, as at St Colman's, surely it makes sense to include a nursery unit for preschool education. That would be looking to, and investing in, the future.

5.30 pm

When preschool educational provision can make a contribution to lifting a community out of social deprivation, help develop that community, or help that community to grow — as is the case with Seymour Hill and Conway — provision should be made in those localities. Adequate support should be given to preschool facilities in such areas.

I urge the Minister to look favourably on the matters that my colleagues and I raise during the debate. The schools that I have mentioned are excellent, and they deserve support. Our younger children deserve the best start in life.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat. I thank my fellow MLA for Lagan Valley for securing the debate, and I congratulate him on becoming junior Minister today. Two of the six MLAs for Lagan Valley are now Ministers.

I support what Jeffrey Donaldson has said about the provision of preschool education. The early years of a child's life are critical in his or her development. All research shows that, before any formal schooling begins, a child has ability to learn and develop. The early intervention that preschool education represents helps equip children for later schooling. Therefore, I support fully some of the things that Jeffrey Donaldson has said about the schools that he mentioned.

Moira is a growth area of Lagan Valley, and there has been a considerable degree of housing development there. The proposal for preschool provision at that school is still with the Minister.

We should welcome the fact that the Department of Education allocates something in the region of £56 million to preschool education. There is preschool provision for well over 90% of the people of Lagan Valley. That, too, is to be welcomed.

I support the provision of a nursery unit at St Colman's Primary School. Last year, an announcement was made about new provision there, and it makes sense to site a nursery unit at that school.

I am a councillor for the Dunmurry area, and I know that there has been a difficulty for a number of years in respect of preschool provision at Seymour Hill. It is difficult to match provision to demand in those areas. Seymour Hill Primary School and Dunmurry Primary School are within a mile of each other.

Alongside the Department of Education, preschool education is delivered by Sure Start. However, Seymour Hill Primary School is not situated in a socially deprived area, and Sure Start targets only the 20% most socially deprived. That issue must be examined.

We should welcome what the Department has done thus far: 90% coverage of the Lagan Valley constituency is not bad; and £56 million is put into preschool education. I am sure the Minister will look carefully at the issues. No decision has yet been made on Moira Primary School or St Colman's Primary School. There is also the integrated sector to consider. Oakwood Integrated Primary School, in the Dunmurry area, also seeks a preschool educational unit.

Obviously, provision at any of those schools will affect that of other schools in the same area. That is true of Moira Primary School, and in Dunmurry, where Seymour Hill Primary School and Dunmurry Primary School are close to each other.

Difficulties also exist in rural areas. Fair Hill Primary School in Kinallen and Dromara Primary School are

both excellent, but there are problems in that area with preschool provision.

I support what Jeffrey Donaldson has said on this matter. I hope that the Minister and the Department of Education will examine those issues. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Poots: I speak not as a Minister but as representative for the Lagan Valley constituency. I congratulate my colleague Jeffrey Donaldson on becoming a Minister. I wish him well, and I trust that he will have long service and deliver as well as for the people of Northern Ireland as he has for the people of Lagan Valley.

I also congratulate him for securing a debate on an important issue that I would have championed in the previous Assembly. At that time, we had great success in securing the provision of preschool education, which was then relatively new. Much work was done to achieve the current level of educational service. It should be a universal service, and children of preschool age should have the opportunity to engage in the preschool sector.

My colleague from Lagan Valley mentioned that part of his constituency that borders South Down and which is serviced mainly by Fair Hill Primary School and by Drumadonnell Primary School in South Down. No preschool provision had been introduced, and, as a consequence, for many years children who live in that rural constituency had to travel for preschool education. That is neither right nor fair and does not meet the conditions for rural proofing. It was nothing to be proud of.

Villages in that area have grown over the past 10 years. Young people in particular have bought houses in Dromara and Kinallen because Hillsborough and Lisburn have become so expensive. As a consequence, the young population in those villages has grown rapidly, and the demand for educational services — particularly preschool and primary-school services — has increased. Preschool education is greatly needed in the area. It has been too long a-coming, and it is crucial that it be delivered as soon as possible. I hope that it can be done in time for the new school year in September. The figures that Jeffrey Donaldson gave for Fair Hill Primary School demonstrate that the numbers are there to sustain preschool provision at that school.

To some extent, my colleague Mr Donaldson has done a school crawl; fortunately, those are the only sort of crawls that he does. However, he omitted a couple of schools that I wish to add to the list. I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Riverdale primary school and Meadow Bridge Primary School; both have preschool playgroups that they wish to become part of their schools. The playgroups would be situated in the school grounds but would retain their independent status. That makes sense; the greater provision in one unit, the better for education, as Mr Butler pointed out.

I encourage the Minister to consider assisting the Southern Education and Library Board in ensuring that facilities can be provided in those schools to allow playgroup support to be established. Those facilities are being used for other activities, so the preschool-age children have to attend at a later time than the children who attend primary school. The toys and games have to be taken out and put away every day because it is not a dedicated facility; it is used by other people in the community who are associated with those buildings. Therefore the children lose out because they cannot attend for a sustained period, and the staff's time is not well used because they spend time setting up and stripping down the facilities.

I encourage the examination of those two particular facilities.

A new integrated school was set up in the Meadow Bridge area as well. I will be open about the fact that I opposed it: I did so because there were a significant number of places available at Meadow Bridge Primary School, Hillsborough Primary School and Moira Primary School in that area. As a consequence, the new school has, to some extent, undermined those schools, which are all viable, but they are all new schools, with around 400 places available.

It is important that we demonstrate our support for those schools and that we support and retain their viability and their strength. Bringing preschool provision to those schools — in the case of Moira Primary School, that means new preschool provision, and in the case of Meadow Bridge Primary School it means moving the preschool playgroup inside the perimeter of the facilities — will enable us to progress their services and help maintain and sustain the investment in education that has been made by the Department.

Mr Craig: I support the debate tabled by my colleague the Rt Hon Jeffrey Donaldson. Furthermore, I congratulate him on his rise to status of junior Minister. If colleagues here think that they are under pressure in Lagan Valley because we have three Lagan Valley MLAs in our party, I now have a Minister and a junior Minister to deal with, so I should be verging on paranoia.

The value of getting children ready to start school is well and truly recognised. Research tells us clearly that children benefit from their experiences in a high-quality preschool environment. There is already a wealth of good practice in preschool education across Northern Ireland. In partnership, we can ensure that those benefits are available to all our children.

In Lagan Valley we need action to ensure that the learning and development settings available for children are those most suitable for their age, as well as action to address key issues, including facilities and resources, training and support for special educational needs. Such actions draw on the effective preschool provision

in Lagan Valley, where no decisions have been made, or actions taken by the Department and boards, in several cases regarding preschool education. Those cases have already been outlined.

Moir Primary School is a prime example. Moira was a village. It is no longer a village; it is almost a town, given the expansion that has taken place in the last 10 years. That expansion is still taking place. Only this morning I looked at even more development plans for Moira, and it will increase again beyond its boundaries. Fair Hill Primary School was mentioned. Yet again, what was a hamlet several years ago is now a small village on the outskirts of Lagan Valley, and it is developing rapidly.

All of that leads to what can only be described as the under-provision of preschool education in those areas. That is something that was not envisaged some years ago, but it is part of the changing demographics in Lagan Valley.

That aside, other areas need to be included. Both Mr Donaldson and Mr Poots mentioned several other cases for examination. One that is particularly close to my own heart is Seymour Hill. We have a playgroup there, which is funded by the parents themselves. They have worked very hard at that provision, and they deserve to be encouraged. In fact, they deserve to be supported by the Department.

Seymour Hill is a small area of deprivation that sits in an area of the Province in which there is a great deal of wealth. In that one estate there is much deprivation, especially in the education sector. I had hoped that the Minister would address that problem.

5.45 pm

I want to see that every child gets the best possible start in life. Children and families are at the centre of what we do. Opportunities are as important at the preschool stage as at other stages in a child's education. I want to ensure that this Assembly is committed to providing quality choices for those parents who wish their child to participate in the preschool environment.

By the time that children start to attend the preschool setting, they will already have had a variety of experiences and developed in a number of ways. In order to use, and build on, the learning that has taken place in the home and its immediate environment, adults should provide children with a rich variety of play activities and other experiences in a stimulating and challenging environment. The focus should be on allowing children to learn without experiencing a sense of failure.

Young children require a safe, secure, healthy, stimulating environment, with adequate supervision; appropriate periods of time for learning through sustained involvement in play; and adults who treat them as individuals and sensitively participate in their

play. Given these needs, it follows that young children require a curriculum that meets their physical, social, emotional and cognitive needs at their particular stage of development. Their curriculum should motivate, challenge and stimulate them; and should be broad and balanced, allowing children to make choices and providing them with opportunities through play and other experiences. Unfortunately, unless more preschool places are made available in Lagan Valley, we will not provide young children with those very important requirements. That is nothing short of a disgrace, and the Minister, her Department and the boards need to investigate it as a matter of urgency.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, want to welcome Mr Donaldson to his new post. I look forward to working with him in the Executive. Our first meeting today was in relation to children and young people, which is fitting. He mentioned a couple of schools; the one that I know best is St Michael's in Finnis. The principal is a very good Gaelic player, as I am sure Mr Donaldson knows. I also listened to the points that he made about other schools, and I will be joining Stanley Poots at the teachers' conference very soon. As the Member knows, there is a round of all the different teachers' conferences, and I look forward to attending all of them.

I listened carefully to what everyone said. There are big issues for the Department, and for us as a society. I want to assure everyone that I am committed to ensuring that all children have the opportunity to avail themselves of preschool education, regardless of the community that they come from, of whether they come from our new communities that have come from different parts of the world, and of whether they learn through English or Irish.

In 2007-08, I have made the following resources available: Sure Start, £12 million; statutory preschool provision, £34 million; and voluntary, private, preschool provision, £10 million. That represents an overall commitment of £56 million. In addition, in the 2007 Budget I secured £8 million to enable early-years services to be funded, plus a further £8 million over the next three years for service development.

I agree with everybody who said that the first few years of a child's life are of critical importance to their future development and well-being. It is during those early months and years that a high percentage of children's learning takes place, attitudes are formed, first relationships are made, concepts are developed and the foundation of all later skills and learning is laid.

Tá cuid mhór fianaise ann go bhfosclaíonn bearnaí cumais go luath, i bhfad sula dtosaíonn an scolaíocht fhoirmiúil agus go mbíonn toradh ar idirghabhálacha luatha a chuidíonn le daltaí na cumais sin a fhorbairt a

bheas de dhíth orthu le héirí sa tsaol agus iad i mbun a méide.

There is much evidence to suggest that ability gaps open up early, long before formal schooling begins, and that the highest returns come from early interventions that set the stage for, and develop, the abilities that are needed for success in later life.

Young children learn more effectively through play, active investigation, enquiry, first-hand experience and talk. Therefore, our provision must facilitate that, and it must involve parents, carers and staff working closely together in order to support children's learning. Our nursery schools are one example of a quality service that supports children. The revised curriculum is bedding in and working well. I have seen some of the best examples of the revised curriculum in preschool, in the early years of primary school and in special schools. The various sectors can learn a great deal from each other.

Policy-makers have recognised that equitable access to quality early-childhood education and care can strengthen the foundation of lifelong learning for all children and support families' broad educational and social needs. Here, early-childhood education and care refers to all-play, care and learning experiences for young children. Those experiences are provided in the voluntary, community, statutory or home-based settings under a range of programmes for which I am responsible. Those programmes include: the preschool education expansion programme, which provides one year of high-quality, funded preschool education in the year before compulsory education for every child whose parents wish it; Sure Start, which is a targeted programme designed to ensure that all children receive a good start in life; the children and young people's funding package, which was discussed today; early-years provision; the home-childcarer approval scheme; the early-years development fund; and the childhood sustainability fund. Traditionally in the North of Ireland, early-years services have been delivered separately by a range of professionals working in distinct education, care and health services, with responsibility resting with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education.

Ón 1 Samhain 2006 tá mo Roinn freagrach as polasaí Luathbhlianta.

Since 1 November 2006, policy responsibility for early-years provision has rested with my Department. The Department of Education has begun to formulate a new early-childhood education and care strategy, from birth up to and including the foundation years of primary school — that is, the nought-to-six age group. That will bring Sure Start, preschool and the home-childcarer approval scheme together in a cohesive manner to support the integration of service delivery, taking into account all relevant factors and the effect

that those changes will have on the lives of children and their families.

In recognition of the fact that not all actions included in an early-years strategy will be for the Department of Education to deliver, the work is being overseen by an interdepartmental group that consists of colleagues from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department for Social Development.

In the 2006-07 school year, my Department funded 21,154 places in preschool education; 14,158 places in statutory nursery schools or nursery classes in primary schools; 658 places in reception classes; and 6,338 places in voluntary and private preschool education centres. The actual numbers enrolled in primary 1 for the 2006-07 school year was 21,497. The school projection model predicted 21,442 primary 1 pupils in September 2007. That indicates that the preschool phase level of provision is running at 98%. Obviously, issues arise concerning geography and the provision of Irish language preschool education, and whether what is provided is sufficient. However, experience tells us that not all parents wish their child to take up a preschool place.

In the 2007-08 school year, education and library boards' preschool education advisory groups identified a shortfall in the number of places in the voluntary sector. My Department provided additional resources in-year to make up that identified shortfall. However, demand cannot always be geographically matched to supply, so we must deal with that issue.

In Lagan Valley, there are 23 electoral wards, which cross the South Eastern and the Southern Education and Library Board areas, and the level of preschool provision in the 2007-08 school year is 92%. However, a number of places in statutory nursery schools and in nursery units that are attached to statutory primary schools are filled by children under the age of three.

That suggests that every child in their final preschool year who applied for a place got one, as statutory settings are required in the arrangements for admissions to give priority consideration to children in their final preschool year.

In addition, Members will wish to note that SEELB returned funding in respect of 35 unused places in the 2007-08 school year; and although SELB does not represent a significant area of the Lagan Valley constituency, it returned funding in respect of 167 unused places.

I listened to the four Members who spoke in the Adjournment debate, and I will take their comments on board. I am considering a development proposal for Moira primary school that will take account of all pertinent issues.

In deciding budget priorities, the Department of Education held consultation meetings to ensure that all equality aspects were considered fully and that relevant groups had an opportunity to contribute. All funding will be based on equality processes and equality impact assessments. It is good that there have been improvements in early-years provision. There is still a way to go, but I look forward to working with my colleagues in the Executive on the issue.

Mr Donaldson: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ruane: I would rather finish my speech. I will, as ever, consider proposals carefully, and I will listen carefully to the arguments.

Adjourned at 5.56 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 3 March 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

February Monitoring Outcome

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on the February monitoring outcome.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): With permission, I wish to make a statement about the Executive's decisions on the February monitoring round. This is the fourth and final monitoring round of the 2007-08 financial year, and Members will be aware that the role and purpose of the in-year process is to help the Executive to make the most of the resources at their disposal. At the Executive's meeting on 28 February 2008, they decided on some reallocations of expenditure for the short time remaining in the current financial year.

It is also important to note that this monitoring round follows the departmental spring Supplementary Estimates, which were debated in the Assembly on 12 February 2008. Departments are constrained by the spring Supplementary Estimates and associated Budget Bill position, because no allocation can be made in the February monitoring round above the position for which legislative authority has been sought. The first stage in each monitoring round is the identification by Departments of resources allocated in previous Budget processes that, for a variety of reasons, will not be spent in this financial year.

In overview terms, reduced requirements declared by Departments in this monitoring round amount to £51.7 million in respect of current expenditure and £61.7 million in respect of capital investment. The level of reduced requirements declared in this round is much greater than the levels that were identified at the corresponding time in previous years. That continues the trend from the previous monitoring round, with the result that the amount declared for this financial year is

some 41% greater than the reduced requirements that were declared last year.

Although I commended Departments for the significant level of reduced requirements identified as part of the December monitoring round, the context for the February monitoring round is quite different, because there is significantly less scope to utilise the resources that become available in the February round than in earlier ones. I, therefore, urge Departments to redouble their efforts, as we move into the 2008-09 financial year, to declare reduced requirements as early as possible in the year so that the opportunity to redeploy funds into priority areas is not missed.

Statutory Committees will have a key role to play by regularly monitoring the financial performance of their respective Departments and identifying, as early as possible in each year, those areas where less spending is expected to take place than had been planned for.

I recognise that a primary focus of Departments is to spend as much of the moneys that have been allocated in the Budget process as possible at the first stage in order to deliver the associated improvements in public services. However, where that is not possible, there is an equal responsibility to ensure that any resources not needed by a particular business area can be redeployed.

Although there is an issue that significant levels of reduced requirements reflect poor planning at the Budget stage, it is much better that Departments and Committees identify reduced requirements earlier rather than later in the financial year or, indeed, allow them to fall as end-of-year underspend. Details of all the reduced requirements declared by Departments are set out in table 1 of my statement, which is available to Members.

The largest reduced requirement in current expenditure — £8.7 million — has been declared by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), following on from the delay in the decision on the review of public administration (RPA). The Department for Social Development (DSD) has declared a £22 million reduced requirement in capital expenditure from additional land sales, and the Department for Regional Development (DRD) has identified a £10 million slippage in the funding required to Northern Ireland Water for this financial year.

The December monitoring round concluded with some £57 million unallocated capital resources, which included anticipated access to our end-year flexibility stock in the 2007-08 block. In the context of such significant sums being available for allocation, but with no corresponding pressures expected, a prudent approach was adopted to minimise underspend and hence facilitate future discussions with the Treasury regarding access to end-year flexibility stock.

Overall, therefore, £69 million was available for allocation in this monitoring round for capital

expenditure, and £39 million could reasonably have been allocated for resource spend. Against that level of resources available for allocation, Departments have submitted current expenditure bids in the amount of £1.6 million and capital investment bids amounting to £63.4 million.

Turning first to the position as regards current expenditure, in light of the late stage of the financial year, only two bids were put forward, both by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL). The Executive have agreed that £0.9 million should be allocated for the purchase of additional book stock to assist library boards in meeting published targets, and a further £0.7 million has been allocated to provide for the winding-up of the Northern Ireland Events Company.

With regard to capital investment, the Executive have agreed to allocate £58.9 million to Departments. That includes £6.9 million to the Department for Regional Development to meet a pressure resulting from delay in planned receipts from asset sales as well as additional cost from a change in accounting treatment for insurance costs associated with the first design, build, finance and operate (DBFO) roads capital programme.

The most significant capital pressure, however, has arisen with respect to DSD because of lower than expected capital receipts from house sales as a result of the more constrained credit environment, and the sale of land at Ballee in Ballymena is not now expected to be finalised until 2008-09.

Although DSD has taken measures to ameliorate the revenue shortfall, the Executive have agreed to meet the net capital pressure of £52 million. That follows on from the £50 million allocated in the December monitoring round to the Department for Social Development for a range of social housing initiatives, including co-ownership; the warm homes scheme; and the social housing development programme.

The consequence of the level of reduced requirements and bids met is that for current expenditure, the level of planned overcommitment is now £13.3 million. This is significantly below our target of £50 million at the conclusion of the February monitoring round and highlights once again the need for Departments to declare all reduced requirements as early in the year as possible. In terms of capital investment, we now have unallocated resources of some £10 million. However, all underspend resource will continue to be available to be carried forward for use by the Executive in the future.

Looking forward, 2008-09 will be the first time in a stable political environment that Northern Ireland Departments will be implementing the spending plans that have been developed by local politicians as opposed to direct rule Ministers. Although the main indicator of success will be improved services, a key milestone will

be that resources are used for the purpose intended and in the timescales envisaged.

In conclusion, I recognise the progress that has been made during 2007-08 to improve financial management and hence ensure a more effective allocation of resources. This work will need to accelerate next year in light of the more challenging fiscal environment faced by the Northern Ireland Executive.

I commend the February monitoring position to the Assembly.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Storey): I thank the Minister for his statement to the House. The Minister plans to reduce overcommitment, year on year, over the Budget period to £100 million in 2008-09; to £80 million in 2009-2010; and to £60 million by 2010-11. The high levels of reduced requirements declared by the Departments at this stage have been managed by overcommitment provision. Will the Minister comment on how underspend will be managed in the future if this pattern of returning resources late in the financial year continues, especially given the plan to reduce overcommitment?

In addition to the important role of each Assembly Statutory Committee in scrutinising its Department's monitoring round returns, to improve the accuracy and effectiveness of financial forecasting processes, is there also a need for the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) to challenge Departments more robustly on the reasons for return of resources and on the timing of those returns? Also, in a statement on the June monitoring round with regard to underspend, the Minister stated that the optimum would be to reduce current underspends close to 1%. Given that today's statement marks the last monitoring round of the financial year, will the Minister comment further on the way forward to reduce current resource and capital underspend?

Mr P Robinson: I thank the Deputy Chairman of the Committee for his questions. I wish that it were possible to give clear answers to them all.

Mr Storey is right to say that there is a pattern: Departments are leaving their underspend declarations to late — almost too late — in the year. Unfortunately, that is where the patterns seem to end. As I indicated in my statement, the amount of underspend this year is significantly greater than it was in previous years. One can only judge the future by the past and present, and therefore DFP, in looking at the degree of overcommitment, looks at it in terms of what has been the previous pattern. That puts the Department in a difficult position if the pattern changes, because it has set the amount of overcommitment to eat up in the various monitoring rounds on the basis of previous patterns. If this year's pattern were to be followed in future years, there might in the June monitoring round be more of

an effort to spend some of the additional funds than was the case in June of this year, when we committed nothing.

We need to watch the patterns very carefully. The Deputy Chairperson is right to say that there is a role for all the Committees — not just the Finance and Personnel Committee, although it has the key role — in monitoring the spend of their Departments to ensure that money is spent on time for the purposes that have been set out, and that any likely underspend is declared as early as possible. In that way, we can make the best use of our funds and have them reallocated for the proper purpose.

12.15 pm

Mr F McCann: Is the Minister aware that the Housing Executive has, for a number of weeks, been suspending repairs until the new financial year? Will he tell us whether this monitoring outcome can be used to ensure that Housing Executive tenants have their repairs carried out, especially new-tenant repairs, without which people cannot move into houses?

Mr P Robinson: The Member will know from my statement that we met all the bids that were made. If there had been an additional bid from the Housing Executive, it would have been looked at very seriously. The difficulty that the Housing Executive — and the Minister for Social Development — will have is that there is a very short period in which to spend this money. That is why it is important that underspending be identified earlier, so that programmes can be put in place, whether it be planned maintenance or whatever else. The only caveat that has to be entered at this stage is whether the Housing Executive could have spent the money, had it been allocated as a result of today's monitoring round. With only a month left to spend the money, it is too late in the year. Also, the Assembly has already accepted the spring Supplementary Estimates.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister agree that, in an ideal world, there would not be under-expenditure on the part of Departments? Regrettably, that has happened. Given this continuing issue, there may be a need to review the amount of funding that is held back for over-expenditure, so that we can be certain that the money that is allocated to Northern Ireland is put to good use here.

I am particularly interested in funding for children and young people. Why was £3.8 million returned unspent at this late stage?

Mr P Robinson: Unfortunately, we do not live in an ideal world. No matter how well a Department might plan for the incoming year, there will always be legal issues, planning issues or other regulatory issues that will mean that plans do not go forward as quickly as expected. There will be pressures on Departments from various areas for more funding. One can never contemplate, a year — or, in many cases, three years — out,

exactly how each Department will spend money. There will always be a level of underspend. What is important is that we have the best management systems, in order to identify as early as possible what underspend there is, so that we can reallocate the funds to priority purposes. I suspect that there is not one Government Department that, if notified back in June that funds were going to be available, could not have identified some worthy purpose, whether it be children and young people or some other issue.

The money, however, is not lost. While it does go back, on paper at least, to the Treasury, we can, of course, negotiate with the Treasury in order to get access to it. I will be doing that. As far as this CSR period is concerned, we successfully negotiated to have all the end-year flexibility stock that is available to the Executive allocated within those three years.

I assume that I will have to go back to the Treasury at the end of the financial year to argue for the inclusion of the money that will be underspent this year.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the fact that any money not spent during this financial year will be carried forward for use by the Executive. I welcome also the allocation of new money to the Department for Social Development, given that the Ballee land sale is not expected to go ahead during this financial year.

As has been said, these are large releases of money at this time of the year, and that is to be regretted. The low level of bids, particularly on the resource side, indicates that Departments were not confident that they could spend the money during this financial year, and I welcome the indication that steps are being taken to improve the management of that aspect. What confidence can the Minister give us that receiving Departments will be able to spend the money during this financial year? It will not look well for the Assembly, after a Budget round in which there was a great deal of clamour for money and public concern in certain areas, if we declare a significant underspend at the end of the financial year. That will create a situation that the public will not understand.

Mr P Robinson: The Member makes the point well. It is not just the public who will not understand that situation; I am the one who has sore ribs and a sore arm, having had it twisted up my back over the past few months by Ministers. They told me that they did not have half enough money in their budgets and that they needed more, and then I find that that they are handing money back to me during two monitoring rounds. It may be a bit difficult to understand, but, ultimately, it is down to financial management.

It is essential that the Committees play a significant role: we did not have the benefit of them during the direct rule period. We are developing a template for

Committees to enable them to examine departmental spending throughout the year, so that it is not left until the tail end of the year to find out that money that could have been used in a Department is not going to be used. The Committee for Finance and Personnel is co-ordinating that work.

We will be in complete control of our Budget during the incoming financial year, having set it ourselves and having the opportunity to implement it ourselves, and we want to improve on the current end-year underspend.

As regards the contemplated asset sale at Ballee, in many ways, we could welcome that situation because if the sale had gone ahead, it would have left more end-year flexibility to be dealt with. The present situation means that the money is likely to be available during the next financial year. Therefore, we will have to look carefully, with the Department, to see where to make the best use of those additional resources.

Dr Farry: I return to the subject of patterns that was raised by Mr Storey. What investigation is the Minister carrying out into the pattern of some Departments regularly declaring large underspends and others regularly receiving additional moneys from those underspends? What consideration is he giving to ensuring that services could be funded in a more strategic way rather than their living, essentially, on scraps from someone else's table? I have in mind the current situation in which quite a lot of Northern Ireland appears to be coned off due to roadworks. The public's perception is that Roads Service is not only spending its own money but that of other Departments by carrying out roadworks at the end of each financial year.

Mr P Robinson: I do not agree that £50-odd million could be said to be scraps. If we had a lot of such "scraps" we could do quite well. The Committee for Finance and Personnel will want to work with all the other Committees to ensure that underspends are identified as early as possible. I do not believe that Departments wilfully allow money to be underspent at the end of the financial year; I believe that they are over-optimistic about being able to spend the money and, therefore, do not want to return it to the centre in case another Department gets hold of it.

However, from where I sit, looking across all the Departments, I would clearly rather that another Department used the funds than send them back to HM Treasury. That would mean that we would have to fight to get the money in a future financial year.

Some Departments find it much easier to spend money quickly. DHSSPS and DRD are two such Departments. For example, money can be spent on road maintenance in a relatively short time — that is probably why the Member has encountered some difficulties when driving around Northern Ireland.

However, I would not like to see what our end-year underspend would be if we did not have our present monitoring round mechanisms, particularly given our Health Service and health boards and the activities of DRD and its Roads Service. We should use funding wherever we can, and Northern Ireland plc would benefit from any improvements in those Departments.

We will be interested to see what will happen as a result of the new treatment that is being granted to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. That will be very much a learning curve for all of us, given that that Department will be able to use and identify its own underspend earlier without fear of having to return the funds to the centre. Consequently, those funds can be used for other purposes, either because of pressures in other areas or, indeed, because the Department wants to develop new programmes. It will be interesting to see how that works over the year; indeed, it may provide a model that we can adopt in other areas.

Mr Weir: How will the special dispensation that has been afforded to the Department of Health affect next year's monitoring process?

Mr P Robinson: Where the Health Service is concerned, the first point is that half of Northern Ireland's Budget will not be part of the monitoring process. Obviously, monitoring will continue, but the benefits or losses in the Department of Health that might result from underspend or additional pressures will be borne by that Department. As I said to the Member's North Down colleague, it is an interesting experiment, and it will be worthwhile examining its results. The Department need not be concerned that some other Department will walk off with any of its early declared underspend; it will be able to use those funds for its own pressures or to develop new programmes. That is a massive gain for the Department, and it will be interesting to see how that experiment works out through the year.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am like other Members in that, when I hear of an underspend of so many millions of pounds, I wonder what is wrong with the system. I was heartened to hear some Members who know more about finance than I do say that they did not understand the process. I was also heartened to hear the Minister of Finance and Personnel agree with Mr O'Loan that it is difficult to understand.

Given that Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has set tackling poverty as a priority, is there any opportunity for the Executive to earmark any of the underspend — which goes across several Departments — in order that poverty specifically can be tackled? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P Robinson: The money is at the disposal of the Executive until the end of the financial year, when it goes back to the Treasury and we have to bid for it again.

I share the Member's view: when faced with constituents proposing various community schemes that require Government funding, I find it difficult to explain the situation. Through Departments, the Government will indicate to those people that they do not have the resources in this financial year to assist the proposed schemes. However, those people will then read in their newspapers or see on television that there is a massive underspend in the very Department from which they were seeking funding. In those circumstances, it is difficult to explain to people why their proposed scheme has not been given the go-ahead.

12.30 pm

Departments have a massive fear of overspending, but I criticise them if they underspend, as do the general public. However, so far as the Treasury is concerned, overspending is the unpardonable sin: the wrath of the Treasury will be poured on Departments if they overspend. Therefore, there is always an attempt to err towards underspend than overspend, but that should be confined to much smaller amounts than is currently the case, and I believe that underspend to that extent comes down to poor financial management.

If underspend were identified at an earlier stage, programmes such as those that the Member mentioned could have been funded at that early stage. However, now that the spring Supplementary Estimates have been dealt with and there is only one month left in the financial year, it will be difficult for Departments to spend in that constrained time frame.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome the Minister's statement. I note that, at this late stage in the financial year, there is a significant number of reduced requirements, and Departments will have grave difficulty in spending the results of that in the available time limit. I also note that that difficulty is much greater than it has been in the corresponding period of previous years. What action will the Minister take to ensure that future reduced requirements are declared much earlier in the year?

Mr P Robinson: Committees will have a key role in ensuring that that happens. As I understand it, my officials are already working with the Committee for Finance and Personnel to develop a template that will allow each Committee to track how resources are working through the system. The Committees will be able not only to do that, but they will be able to question their Minister and departmental officials as to why spending is falling behind. In areas for which there has been no expenditure, each Minister and his or her officials must give commitments that the moneys will be used within the required time frame. The present financial year

began under direct rule, with the result that Committees have not yet had that essential role to play.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I note with considerable interest the £1.6 million — which is essentially for two projects — that has been allocated to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Will the Minister tell the House whether the £0.9 million that has been allocated for the purchase of additional books to assist the education and library boards is a recognition that, with the establishment of the single library authority, not enough money has been made available for books and for the delivery of front-line services? The Committee is hearing that message from all the education and library boards, and I hope that the Minister can confirm that there is an acceptance in the Executive that that has been the case.

Secondly, following on from Claire McGill's question, is the Minister concerned about the so-called culture of underspend in Departments? If so, what is he doing to turn that around?

Mr P Robinson: The Executive have met the only two bids that were made for resource expenditure, both of which came from DCAL. My understanding is that the amount that was allocated to DCAL enables it to meet its book stock targets. As Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Member will have considerable influence on future targets. However, that allocation has meant that the current target has now been met.

I repeat: a process is being established to allow the Member and his Committee — and all other Committee members — to have a greater role in keeping their Departments to account and to ensure that they are meeting the spending targets that were allocated in the Budget. Departments fought for more money, they helped their Ministers to get the funds that are available to them, and now it is their duty to make sure that their Ministers spend the money within the set time frame.

Mr Ross: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement. Several Members have mentioned the significant sums of money that various Departments are handing back. What actions will the Minister take to ensure that, in future years, there is access to the 2007-08 underspend funds?

Mr P Robinson: The process is not automatic. The Treasury recognises and identifies a stock of end-year flexibility, and, in order to receive the underspend for a given financial year, the case must be argued with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. However, such end-year flexibility stocks are counted as ours.

We reached agreement with the Treasury concerning the significant underspends that had built up; those funds will be allocated over the three years of the compre-

hensive spending review. Therefore, all underspend that has been identified to date has been allocated to the next three financial years. In addition, this financial year's underspend will be added to our end-year flexibility stock, and I will have to negotiate separately its allocation over following years.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister confirm that discussions concerning the purchase of the former Forkhill military base are ongoing with Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) officials, and that no final decision has been taken? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P Robinson: Sufficient underspend funding was available to have covered what the Minister sought for the Forkhill site. However, before reaching that stage, a business case must be submitted and approved by Department of Finance and Personnel officials. That is a highly technical matter — I have not the slightest idea about how the figures are produced. However, I have met the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, who has been informed about the business plan's failings, particularly about how costs might be reduced by additional funding from other sources and/or by reducing the amount of bells and whistles on the proposal. My officials will consider any resubmitted proposal. Of course, should a business plan be approved, funding is available for the Department.

Mr McCausland: Will the Minister provide an assessment of this financial year's underspend?

Mr P Robinson: The Member's question invites me to put my head on the block. I can tell him what the Departments have told me the year-end underspends will be, although, in the past, those Departments gave me figures that would not have led to the underspend available for this monitoring round. Therefore, I emphasise caution. However, the figures indicate that there will be £104 million in current expenditure and £49 million in capital expenditure. Both figures are considerably less than those for the previous year; however, I will wait until the end of the financial year to ascertain whether the Departments meet the figures that have been submitted. In addition, Committees should question their Departments about likely underspends for this financial year in order that, at the end of the year, they can compare those with the targets set.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. If I may have the liberty to raise a couple of issues, I would first like to further explore the matter raised by my colleague from West Belfast Mr McCann. The Housing Executive has apparently run out of money for remedial work. The Minister did give a full answer, but I would like to know whether, in the past two monitoring rounds, the Minister for Social Development told the Finance Minister that the Housing Executive was in danger of running out of money for repairs. Housing

Executive houses are sitting empty because the Housing Executive does not have enough money to repair them.

In addition, what measures will the Department of Finance put in place to ensure that the public purse will get value for money from the land sale at Ballee, Ballymena?

Mr P Robinson: Very often, I am criticised for control freakery and micromanaging Departments; yet there are times when people ask why I allow a Department to do one thing, when it should be doing something else. We cannot have it both ways.

On the Housing Executive issue, all I can tell the Member is that, as he knows, every bid received from the Department for Social Development in relation to that matter has been met. If further moneys are required, it is up to DSD, in its discussions with the Housing Executive, to make a bid for those. I cannot second-guess what the discussions were in the Department. Those questions are more appropriately asked of the DSD Minister.

As far as the more general issue is concerned, I again emphasise that I can allocate resources to Departments, but it requires them to put in bids. Departments will put in bids only if they are sure that they can spend that money during the course of the financial year. Therefore, the earlier that an underspend is recognised by a Department, the earlier we can reallocate that funding and make it available for the use of other Departments. I cannot spell it out enough: early identification is down to the Departments. I cannot do it myself — it must be done by the Departments.

The Ballee land issue is a matter for the Department for Social Development. The funds will be available in the next financial year. That gives a longer opportunity for officials to look at how to spend that money, because it was expected that that money would be available in this financial year, rather than in the next. I hope that some financial-management benefits will arise from that.

Mr Savage: As a member of the Agriculture Committee, I ask the Minister to explain the underspend of 5.9%, which amounts to £13.9 million, and the forecast for capital investment, which amounts to 25.4%. That is sad news for the agriculture industry. Will he explain how he arrived at those figures?

Mr P Robinson: I did not arrive at those figures — they were provided by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Throughout the monitoring rounds, we have been able to meet bids — with the exception of the Forkhill bid, for the reasons that I stated earlier. If there are specific issues that the Member wants to raise about the way that the Department of Agriculture has dealt with matters, I suggest, as diplomatically as possible, that he raises them with the Minister for that Department.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008

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

That this Assembly approves the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008.

The Order today is not simply about setting the level of rates for the next financial year; it is about setting a new approach to how we address financial issues in Northern Ireland. The days of asking the people of Northern Ireland to make an ever-increasing financial contribution to efficient public services are over. Now it is time for Government to deliver.

The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) is a vital part of the annual financial cycle. The form of devolution that we have in Northern Ireland means that most tax-raising powers remain with the national Parliament at Westminster. Therefore, this Order provides the Assembly with its only mechanism to raise additional resources to fund key areas of central expenditure.

12.45 pm

As I indicated previously, devolution is about making a difference to the lives of people in Northern Ireland, and there is no clearer signal of that than our approach to the regional rate. The days of increases in the regional rate compounding to 62% over five years are long gone. Instead, we are steering a new direction for the future, which will benefit every household and business in Northern Ireland. For the first time in many years, instead of the householder being asked to bear the burden, our key focus is to ensure that the public sector delivers.

In my speech to the Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation (IRRV) in Belfast in 2007, I stated that one of my priorities was to control the level of the regional rate in Northern Ireland. The Department of Finance and Personnel has delivered on that commitment.

Northern Ireland faces major challenges, none more so than in our public spending plans, which must reflect reality and the fact that we will have to manage our finances within a framework that has, at its foundation, a commitment to delivery, innovation and efficiency.

During the draft Budget debate, I highlighted that, in the last three years of direct rule, Northern Ireland had regional rate increases of 9%, 19% and 6% respectively, with more planned for the years to come. During the Budget debate on 12 February, I emphasised that a 60% increase in the regional rate over five years was unacceptable. In that context, and with the pending introduction of water charges in 2009, I announced

that the domestic regional rate should be frozen for the next three years.

The business regional rate increases have been more modest, averaging about 3.3% over the past five years. However, businesses will also be faced with water charges. Therefore, in the draft Budget, I announced an average increase in those rates of 2.7% a year for the next three years. That is in line with the expected rate of inflation and, therefore, in real terms, amounts to a freeze.

That level of regional rate is expected to generate revenue of £530 million. At the same time, we must continue to consider our methods. There is a real challenge to address head-on the efficiencies that we need to make so that more resources can be redirected to the front-line services that need them.

I want to see how we can achieve even greater efficiencies beyond the 3% a year targets that have already been set. Members are aware of how much emphasis I want to be placed on that matter. The new performance and efficiency delivery unit will be in the front line of the battle to strip out waste and identify where we can achieve significant savings of public money.

Some Members have argued that, notwithstanding the 60% increase over the past five years and the introduction of water charges, householders should contribute even more to public expenditure. I disagree, not simply as a matter of political philosophy but because of the relatively modest contribution that such an increase would make to public expenditure.

The regional rate contributes less than 6% of all funding available to the Executive each year. Therefore, if I had sought a 1% increase in the rate, that would have raised about £2.7 million of additional revenue. Similarly, some have suggested that the Department should maintain the domestic rates in real terms. To do that at the current inflation rate of 2.7% would raise only £5.86 million. Therefore, generating significant extra revenues through the regional rate would require increases in rate levels that no one would consider acceptable. The modest sums that could be raised through rate increases can be compared with the resources that will be released through efficiency savings made by Departments. Departments plan to deliver £790 million in efficiency gains by 2010-11.

I now turn to the detail of the Order, and I shall briefly describe each article.

This short statutory rule specifies the regional rate poundages for the financial year 2008-09. Article 1 provides the title of the Order and gives the operational date as the day after it is affirmed by the Assembly.

Article 2 provides for the duration of the Order, and it will apply until 31 March 2009. Article 3 specifies

29.89 pence in the pound as the commercial regional rate poundage and 0.3608 pence in the pound as the domestic regional rate poundage. Today, we are not only setting the rates for Northern Ireland for the next year but, more fundamentally, charting a new direction for the people of Northern Ireland with our approach to Government. The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 not only gives the Northern Ireland householder a well-deserved break from large increases but it lays out a challenge for Departments to deliver a more efficient form of Government. I, therefore, commend the Order to the Assembly.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Storey): I welcome the Minister's statement, and I thank him for his opening remarks. The purpose of the statutory rule is to fix the amount of the regional rates for the year ending 31 March 2009. Members will be aware that, as part of the draft Budget announcement of 25 October 2007, regional rates for domestic properties were frozen for the next three years, and the rate for non-domestic properties was increased only in line with inflation.

When the Minister announced the draft Budget, he mentioned that the past three years have seen regional rate increases of 9%, 19% and 6% respectively, and that the average regional rates bill had increased by 62% since 2002. The Committee for Finance and Personnel's report on the Executive's draft Budget welcomed the proposals not to increase the regional domestic rate, especially given the significant increase in that element of the rates during the recent period of direct rule. The Committee also acknowledged the proposal to hold the increase in the non-domestic sector in line with inflation and, therefore, minimise the burden on business. That is in line with the Executive's wider priority of promoting economic growth.

On 6 February, officials from the Department of Finance and Personnel briefed the Committee on the proposals contained in the statutory rule. The Committee formally considered the rule at its meeting on 20 February, at which a motion to recommend that the rule be affirmed by the Assembly was approved by a majority vote. I, therefore, support today's motion.

Mr Beggs: I wish to put on record that I am content that the rates should continue at the levels indicated.

Mr O'Loan: I support the motion.

Dr Farry: I shall not be as brief as the two Members who spoke before me. The Alliance Party is opposed to this statutory rule.

Mr S Wilson: The Alliance Party says no again.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party says yes to proper public services in Northern Ireland and to taking a responsible and realistic approach on issues regarding taxation and expenditure. As the opposition in the

Chamber, it would be easy for the party, on the one hand, to point out all the deficiencies about public spending and investment in sustainable public services and rebalancing the economy, and, on the other hand, simply buy in to decisions being taken on households and other taxation. However, that would be opportunistic and irresponsible.

The Alliance Party has not provided a fully costed alternative to the Budget. It does not have access to the resources and the information to conduct such an exercise. If and when the Alliance Party is in Government, it will be up to the party to make its own choices about how it will balance income and resources. However, party members want to highlight, with a greater sense of realism, the choices that have to be made and the potential consequences of the choices that those in Government are making.

I want to stress two important points. First, the Alliance Party is opposed to the regional rate. It would replace it with an alternative measure that is based on ability to pay, such as local income tax. Property values are not an accurate assessment of ability to pay. We are all aware of those people who are asset rich and income poor.

Secondly, like everyone else, the Alliance Party wants —

Mr S Wilson: Given that the Member has identified an issue here — that some people are asset rich and income poor — surely that is an even more compelling argument to support this Order in that it is designed to help people to avoid huge rate increases?

Dr Farry: If one is talking about an increase in the rates at the level of inflation, which is probably the most sensible way forward, then that would amount to 25p to 30p in the pound per week for the average household. That is quite a small amount. It is also worth recognising that not every household in Northern Ireland pays rates. Therefore, this benefit from the Executive will assist only some people. The people who do not pay rates tend to be those who are most dependent on public services, and the Alliance Party is concerned about the level at which public services have been funded.

Mr Weir: The Member has indicated that he is concerned that ratepayers will be paying while others will not: is he advocating the introduction of the poll tax here? *[Laughter.]*

Dr Farry: The Member is well aware of the Alliance Party's proposals in this regard. My point is that some people will not benefit from what is, in effect, a cut in the level of the regional rate. However, there are some who very much depend on public services, in particular the Health Service, and who will suffer as a consequence of the underfunding of the Health Service.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: Just a moment, Simon. It is important that Members bear what I have said in mind, not least when MLAs from all parties are commenting on the lack of funding in the Health Service.

Mr Hamilton: That was a good lead-in as the Member mentioned lack of funding. Precisely how much additional investment, on top of the many hundreds of millions of pounds of additional money that has already been poured in, does the Alliance Party want to pump into public services?

Dr Farry: I have already addressed that point in my opening remarks, and the Member can look at previous Hansard Reports. It is interesting to note that Members from all parties are raising concerns about the amount of funding available to the Health Service. In the North Down constituency, a DUP councillor has been extremely vocal in pointing out the difficulties that the local health trust is having in dealing with so-called efficiency savings and is saying that they amount to cuts. He is calling for additional investment in the Health Service. Therefore, it is important to recognise that all parties seem to be concerned with the issue, although some seem to be a bit straighter with the people about the choices that are being advocated for Northern Ireland.

In the past, the Alliance Party has criticised rates increases of between 8% and 19% and has voted against them in this Chamber. They are a huge burden on people, and we join with the Minister in recognising that. However, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, along with all his Executive colleagues and their parties, has now gone to the other extreme, with a freeze on the regional rate for the next three years. In practice, that amounts to a cut.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member not acknowledge that although rating levels are being held for this year, that reflects the large increases of previous years? Does he not recognise that huge burdens will be placed on householders in the next two years with the introduction of water rates? Does he want higher household rates on top of water charging? Does he not recognise that that would be extremely burdensome and would cause particular hurt to the working poor — those who are just above the threshold for receiving rates relief? People who have to work and have to pay their full rates would accept that continuing to increase rates will adversely affect the working poor.

Dr Farry: We are all conscious in this House of the ticking time bomb of water charges — an issue which, in many respects, puts this debate into context. However, there are fundamental reasons why we need to take a responsible approach to the level of the regional rates. On the one hand, going for large increases is irresponsible; however, at the same time, going for what is, in

effect, a cut is also irresponsible in light of the pressing need for investment in public services. There is also the issue of the other financial consequences it will have in our dealings with the Treasury.

1.00 pm

Mr S Wilson: The Member has given way a number of times, and I appreciate his doing so again. I am trying to understand his logic. An 8% increase in the rates was such a huge burden that the Alliance Party, and, indeed, the then Member for Lagan Valley Seamus Close opposed it vehemently during a previous mandate. However, Dr Farry is now arguing that a freeze in the rates, which, as he said, would save about 25p a week, should be opposed. The 8% increase represented a weekly increase of 75p — which was a huge burden that the Alliance Party was totally opposed to — but a saving of 25p per week is being dismissed. Will the Member explain the logic of that?

Dr Farry: We want to avoid a situation in which we are swinging from one extreme to the other. A planned strategic approach should be taken on issues such as the regional rate. The regional rate is one element of public service funding in Northern Ireland, and it is important that it is addressed in a balanced and sustainable manner.

The extremes of having major hikes and unrealistic freezes in the regional rate are unfair and will, potentially, have to be addressed. Planning for an increase in the regional rate of around the rate of inflation is the responsible approach and will fund public services. The people of Northern Ireland are intelligent: they realise what is happening.

Northern Ireland faces a difficult financial starting point. Public expenditure here is already heavily skewed because of the distortions that result from trying to manage a divided society. It is worth putting on record that the Alliance Party will be meeting the Minister of Finance and Personnel next week to discuss how the cost of division in Northern Ireland can be addressed.

Unnecessary duplication of services carries opportunity costs for the possibility of providing quality public services for the whole community. Sadly, the Executive are not yet prepared to face up to the challenge of creating a shared future despite the clear social, economic and financial imperatives for doing so. A shared future is a marginal theme in the Programme for Government and the Budget.

The British Government have produced a tight comprehensive spending review (CSR) settlement for Northern Ireland — the Barnett formula gradually works against the interests of Northern Ireland also. The regional rate is supposed to reflect the differences between the sources of service delivery in Northern Ireland and Great Britain. In Britain much more is

delivered by local authorities. The regional rate, therefore, is a vital component in the funding of local services. However, the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Executive, through their decisions on tax, have made a tight financial settlement even tighter. Rather than investing in public services, or rebalancing the regional economy, they have used available resources as a tax giveaway.

The Alliance Party has criticised the Budget for its shortcomings on investment in a number of service areas. Health is the major area of concern. By 2011, Northern Ireland will be £200 million behind where it needs to be to keep up with service provision levels in the rest of the UK.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is now getting the lion's share of the Budget. Nonetheless, we are flatlining compared to those in the rest of the UK. People here will pick up on that point when they see the quality of the health services that are available to them.

I have pointed out that the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust is wrestling with the need to deliver the so-called efficiency savings. I am sure that other health trusts are in a similar position. Such efficiency savings appear awfully like cuts to services.

In due course a lot of political parties and Members from different constituencies will be pointing out the problems in local health provision and will be making claims for additional resources or the retention of service levels. When that situation arises, I will say to them that they have made their beds and must lie in them.

The Alliance Party has also highlighted mental-health provision. In Northern Ireland only 8% of the overall health budget is spent on mental-health provision. In the rest of the UK the figure is 12%. Everyone across the political spectrum is conscious of the need for additional investment in mental-health services in Northern Ireland. However, yet again, there is a reluctance to match rhetoric with actions where finance is concerned.

I could highlight others issues including environmental protection; arts funding; public transport; transport infrastructure in general; and investing in the economy. The list of public services that are being underfunded is substantial.

It is worth noting once again that several organisations, including the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland (ERINI), the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), have challenged the approach that has been taken in the Budget to household taxation. I appreciate that the Minister has outlined recently his reasons for disagreeing with those organisations' analysis; he is perfectly entitled to do so, and, no doubt, I will

also disagree with their analysis in some respects. However, it is worth recognising that important, credible organisations in our society believe that we have taken a populist, rather than an evidence-based, approach to local taxation.

For different reasons, those organisations recognise that additional resources should be reinvested in either first, rebalancing the economy — the belief of the CBI and ERINI — or secondly, in addressing social problems — the belief of NICVA. The Alliance Party does not want to see the tax burden here become any more arduous than it currently is, but serious questions must be asked about an approach to local taxation that is based on populism rather than evidence.

Clearly, the Alliance Party's proposals would not be able to cover all areas of investment, but they would make more of a start than the Executive have done to date. To clarify the Alliance Party's position on income issues, it would involve a focus on three areas. First, the cost of segregation would have to be addressed and funds for reinvestment elsewhere should be released, thus potentially reducing taxation in the long run. Secondly, the Alliance Party would also pursue efficiency savings, although in that regard a subtle distinction should be made — for the Alliance Party, efficiency savings do not involve merely doing the same with fewer resources, but rather ensuring that resources are transferred from inefficient old priorities to more efficient new priorities and to meeting new demands. Thirdly, we would follow an evidence-based approach to local taxation. Rather than going from one extreme that comprises rates hikes to the other, effectively cutting rates, we would take a balanced approach, striving to keep rates in and around at the level of inflation.

Another consequence of the policy that has been adopted is that the parity principle may be under threat. For almost 60 years, Northern Ireland has matched the levels of social security provision in Great Britain. However, an assumption that the tax burden should be standardised as far as possible throughout the United Kingdom is behind part of the bargain that the Executive wish to make. How will the Treasury react to the approach that has been taken on local taxation?

Furthermore, how will this — or any future — Executive be able to argue credibly for favourable funding, given that the resources that we receive are used for a populist approach to taxation, rather than for further investment in sustainable public services? That is a strange approach for unionists to take, to say the least. I am also concerned about the message that the Executive are sending out to wider society: they are creating unrealistic expectations regarding local taxation issues. The Executive may be placing themselves in a financial straitjacket. There will be a time when the Executive will need to raise funds from the regional

rate to pay for local services, and I fear that they are making things more difficult for themselves in the long run. A rise in rates in or around the rate of inflation would be more sustainable and would be a way to avoid those difficulties. Above all, this argument is academic, given the debacle concerning Northern Ireland Water and the very steep charges that people in Northern Ireland may now be facing.

The Executive have agreed what is effectively a right-wing Budget, and I congratulate the Minister's success in getting the other three Executive parties to sign up to it. They have all made their choices in that regard. However, I remind the members of all the political parties that are in the Executive that they must be careful about how they argue for things over the months and years to come. They have all made their choices to sign up to the Budget, and, by implication, to the approach that has been taken to the regional rate. In so doing, they have no credibility when they raise issues regarding the underfunding of health, education or transport. People cannot have it both ways when they are in Government. I note that all the Executive parties have made that point in the past: we cannot have it both ways.

The Alliance Party's approach is the reasonable and realistic one, and I think that the people of Northern Ireland appreciate and understand it. My colleagues and I are hearing on doorsteps and in our constituency offices about people's concerns for the future of the public services in Northern Ireland, particularly the Health Service. People need to be realistic when they consider the parties in this Assembly and the decisions that they are making. They must ask themselves whether those decisions add up.

Mr Hamilton: Dr Farry's contribution was longer than the two that preceded it. My contribution may be slightly longer than those of Mr O'Loan and Mr Beggs, but it will not be as lengthy as that of the Member for North Down. That will be another relief for the rate-payers of Northern Ireland.

Mr S Wilson: It took that long for the Alliance Party to explain its position.

Mr Hamilton: The Member is absolutely right.

Lest there be any doubt, I welcome the introduction of the Order. It is my rule of thumb that if rates are to be frozen, it is a good idea to vote for and support that. One reason that I became involved in politics was to help, in whatever small way I can, to ease the burden faced by ratepayers, particularly hard-pressed working families, who have endured phenomenal rate rises in recent years.

The rise in the regional rate of over 60% has been mentioned, and in one year there was an increase of almost 20%. In its own small way, and within the limited scope that it has, the Assembly is helping to

ease that burden. When the Minister of Finance and Personnel announced the proposal in his Budget statement towards the end of last year, I thought that all parties would support it.

However, much to my surprise and that of many others, the Alliance Party has consistently opposed the proposal. At meetings of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, the Alliance Party was joined by the PUP in voting against the Order and by the SDLP in voting against the cap on industrial rates that will be discussed later. If such a cap were introduced, businesses would not pay any higher rates than they do now.

Many Members view the Alliance Party's conversion to old-style tax-and-spend socialism as somewhat curious. It is a strange switch, and it has resulted in some DUP Members branding the Alliance Party's spokesman on finance "Fidel" Farry. However, given the winds of change that are sweeping through Cuba, that is perhaps no longer an appropriate name.

Even though this is a serious subject, the Alliance Party's contributions have resulted in it taking on a comic quality, to the extent that a more appropriate title would be "Bruce Forsyth" Farry. Dr Farry takes every opportunity in the Assembly, at meetings of the Committee for Finance and Personnel or when addressing the general public to say "Higher, higher." He wants people's rates bills to be even higher than they are now. However, perhaps "Bruce Forsyth" Farry is not an appropriate name either, because not too many people will say "Good game, good game" or "Didn't he do well?" to him when he talks to them on their doorsteps during the run-up to the next election.

The Alliance Party states that it merely seeks a rise in the regional rate that is based on the rate of inflation, which, it argues would be a more measured option. However, when Members of the Alliance Party are pressed on how much the rise should be, they do not come up with an answer. Dr Farry repeatedly referred to health, and the Alliance Party subscribes to the claptrap that there is an annual £200 million shortfall in funding for health over the period of the Budget, totalling £600 million over the three years. To raise that money through a rise in the regional rate would require an increase of over 200%.

Dr Farry: The figure of a £200 million shortfall in funding came from the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland: was it talking claptrap?

Mr Hamilton: The amount of money that has consistently been allocated to the health budget over the years has resulted in the current situation in which, compared with the start of the decade, its budget has doubled. The money involved is not a small amount: it has doubled from £2 billion to over £4 billion. There are massive inefficiencies in the Health Service.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Member accept that the Member for North Down said that the Alliance Party was perfectly justified and right in opposing an 8% increase in the regional rate during the Assembly's previous mandate because it meant a 75p increase a week per household? Now, however, Dr Farry advocates that a further £200 million be raised through an increase in the regional rate. That would mean an increase well in excess of 8% in rate bills, but during the current mandate he can justify that.

Mr Hamilton: Mr Wilson is correct. An increase based on inflation would raise a paltry figure relative to the massive increase in spending that the Alliance Party seeks. It would not even scratch the surface of the amount that their spending plans require. Even to raise the £200 million to meet the shortfall over the three-year period would require an increase of over 200% in the regional rate. The average bill would increase by £920 from the current figure of just over £400. The Alliance Party wants to inflict that burden on people.

1.15 pm

Dr Farry: I understand that the Member studied accountancy at Queen's at the same time that I read political philosophy, so I will perhaps challenge his point about socialism and communism later. He said that the Northern Ireland regional rate raises some £590 million per annum, and yet he referred to an increase of £200 million as a doubling of the regional rate. Surely £200 million is merely a fraction of £590 million, rather than a multiple? That is not to say, of course, that the Alliance Party advocates the funding of that gap from the regional rate. However, given that he has an accountancy degree, can the Member explain how he does his sums?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is not, of course, a blanket total of £200 million that has been asked for; rather, the figure is £200 million per year, totalling £600 million over the period. When I heard of that demand coming from the Alliance Party, and from other Benches, I asked the Department of Finance and Personnel by how much that would increase the regional rate. The answer was that the regional rate would have to increase by 228% to £920. That is how much it would cost; that would be the burden on the taxpayer. Indeed, that is only a fraction of the burden that would be incurred if Alliance Members' wishes were granted. They want a litany of things, from environmental protection to the arts, and everything in between. They want more and more —

Mr S Wilson: Tractor farms.

Mr Hamilton: Tractor farms in the Urals. *[Laughter.]*

Mr S Wilson: Gulags for — *[Laughter.]*

Mr Hamilton: Yes, maybe they could break down the cost of division with an integrated gulag.

That £600 million, and the doubling or even trebling of the regional rate, would only be the start of the Alliance Party's plans. Those of us who listened for years to the Alliance Party crying out for devolution under any circumstances, so that a difference could be made from the direct rule state of affairs, are bewildered by the latest nonsense coming from their Benches.

This is a difference from direct rule. If direct rule had been in place today, the people of Northern Ireland would have faced a massive increase in their regional rate, on top of what they have already paid over the years. Businesses too would, undoubtedly, already be facing the prospect of 50% industrial rates, rising to 100% in a few years. That is the difference that this Assembly is making; that is the difference that devolution is making. I warmly welcome the introduction of this Order, and give it my wholehearted support.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Hamilton, thank you for the insight into your level of television viewing.

Mr Shannon: I am glad of the opportunity to question the Minister on this subject. I welcome his report and the opportunity for local involvement, at Assembly level, on the issue of regional rates. Some time ago, I brought the matter of regional rates for properties with agricultural occupancy clauses to the Minister's attention, and there was discussion between us and with other bodies about it. Estate agents have opined that the value of properties with such clauses is 40% to 50% less than it would otherwise be.

Is the Minister now in a position to tell the Assembly whether he has addressed that anomaly in the rating system? It has already had, and will continue to have, a great effect on a number of people in my constituency of Strangford, and, indeed, on people throughout the Province. I am not sure exactly how many people are affected, but it impacts on anyone who has a property with an agricultural occupancy clause.

Mrs Long: I welcome a couple of things in what the Finance Minister said. He said that this was about setting out a new approach to the regional rate so as to avoid the massive increases that we have had in the last number of years, and to ensure that the public sector delivers. I do not believe that there is an elected representative in this Chamber who would wish that we did otherwise.

However, he also talked about controlling the level of the regional rate.

Although the sentiment is admirable, my party's concern is not about the current level of the regional rate but about the creation of a boom-and-bust cycle in which huge hikes for several years will be followed by a complete freeze that will then force another couple of

huge hikes. The Alliance Party does not believe that that way forward is sustainable. My party's concern is that, for the public's sake, rates bills are properly managed.

My party also welcomes efficiency savings. No one who sits in the Chamber believes that there is no room for efficiency savings in the public sector — no one is arguing otherwise. However, the Assembly must carefully consider areas in the public sector where the problem is underfunding, not lack of efficiency, and must confront that wherever it exists. No one argues against efficiency savings, because everyone wants to have efficient public services. However, to achieve efficiency, the Assembly must control spending and must not get into a negative cycle in which it freezes rates while knowing that doing so will put it under pressure later. It is a matter of long-term planning.

Several Members asked valid questions during the debate. However, I disagree with them in interpretation. For example, everyone agrees that some of the rates hikes that occurred during direct rule were excessive. There is no question about that, and a particular political point was being made. Dr Farry made a significant point when he highlighted the fact that the Government, which still retains control of the Treasury and the allocations that the Assembly receives from that quarter, are the same Government who believe that the contribution level from local householders in Northern Ireland must be increased.

The Assembly is now in control and cannot be forced to raise those funds through rates in the sort of measure that the Government have during the past three years. However, it will not go unnoticed if the Assembly freezes rates and then goes to the Treasury to ask for additional resources. The Assembly must be careful to ensure that when it approaches the Treasury, it does so with a rational and reasonable argument and can defend its position.

Roy Beggs Jnr mentioned poverty and the working poor. It is right that those matters be raised. Part of my concern is that people who fall into the category of the working poor will be those most damaged by the unpredictability of their future finances; the boom-and-bust cycle in which rates are fine for two years and then become outrageously expensive at the next top-up.

When those issues were debated in Belfast City Hall, colleagues who sit to my left in the Chamber made the point repeatedly that the problem was the lack of a measured approach towards rates — 19% increases and so forth — which damages people because they cannot plan for their future effectively. Therefore, for the sake of the working poor, there must be some predictability about what rates increases are likely to be — not only during the next year or three years, but in the long term.

Simon Hamilton quite rightly identified the fact that it would be easy to support the argument for no rates increase. Of course, it would be easier to tell the public that the Assembly will not be asking them for any more money. If the Assembly stopped at that point, it would be incredibly easy. However, the Alliance Party believes that the Assembly must be responsible and must tell the public that rates must be managed in a regular and measured way in order that it can deliver public services. Dr Farry clearly explained the consequences of not raising the required amount of money.

It would be easy and popular for the Assembly to simply back the notion of having no rates increase. It would be easy to put one's hand up in favour of such a move. However, what is difficult to do is to articulate a constructive argument as to why rates must be managed differently. The Alliance Party has been accused of saying no again — in fact, that is not true. My party does not want to be destructive and negative: it wants to put forward constructive, alternative arguments, which is the opposition's role in this place.

My party has also been accused of wanting to spend a huge amount of money. Frankly, that makes me want to laugh. If one examines the manifestoes of every party in the Chamber, it is clear that all of them made considerable commitments to the public. The difference is that the Alliance Party thought through the consequences of the commitments that it made and was aware of what must be done differently in order to meet those commitments.

Realistically, all parties must be serious when they write their manifestos and make their promises, because — since devolution — private Members' motions have consistently called for more money for this, more money for that and more investment in the other. Those motions have come from all the parties, and the majority of them have not come from the Alliance Party — that is a false statement. Members constantly call for extra money, and I look forward to future private Members' motions that explain from where the money will be taken.

That is the challenge that has been put to those of us in opposition, and I put it back to those in Government.

Mr P Robinson: Believe it or not, I am grateful to all the Members who contributed to the debate.

As I said earlier, the Order provides the Administration with a vital tool to raise much-needed additional revenue to fund public expenditure on key services and provisions. Therefore, it is imperative that we use it wisely and get the correct balance between what is reasonable to levy on households and commercial premises, while raising sufficient funds to meet our spending requirements. We have that balance right this year and in the years of the CSR period; the public will see an Administration that makes a difference to their

lives by delivering on its promises and being in touch with what is required to improve our services.

As custodians of the money raised through the regional rate, it is our job to ensure that that money is used to its maximum potential. That way, we will be able to realise a more vibrant economy and better quality services for all our people.

The main arguments on the amount set in the Order have been covered in previous debates on the Budget. Dr Farry used the same speech that he used on two or three occasions — it does not improve the more that one hears it. He stated, correctly, that parties cannot have it both ways. However, while he was saying that he was attempting to have it both ways. We must have an open, transparent and honest debate on the issue.

Dr Farry deliberately does not say how much additional revenue is required to meet his aspirations for health, transport and education. Every now and again, he makes inaccurate quips about the amount of underfund. People in Northern Ireland have 7% more money a head spent on them in health than people in Great Britain — not less. If Dr Farry is going to enter the debate, he should at least do so with accurate figures.

Dr Farry: Will the Minister give way?

Mr P Robinson: I will give way in a moment. However, the Member might want to wait for a while because, as I continue there will be a few more questions for him to answer.

I agreed with one thing that Dr Farry said. The public are intelligent and able to see what politicians are up to. We have seen what the Alliance Party is up to — they try to show that they can meet their requirements for health, education and transport with an inflation-based increase in the regional rate for householders in Northern Ireland. In my statement, I said that — taking inflation at 2.7% — an inflation-based increase would realise £5.86 million. Will Dr Farry tell me how the £5.86 million, which — as he says he wants — would be raised by an inflation-based increase in the regional rate, will pay for the £200 million that he wants to spend in health, not to mention the millions he wants to spend in education or transport? His shopping list may be even longer than that. The Member must be straight with the people of Northern Ireland — if he asks for large sums of money for those worthy causes, the cost of which he would add onto the rates, he must tell people that he will treble their rates, rather than double them.

1.30 pm

The answer to the question that he put to my colleague is that the £590 million is not the amount of money from the regional rate from households but from households and non-domestic properties. Therefore, my friend is right to say that the £200 million would

have doubled the regional rate. That is what the Alliance Party wants. Not content with a 62% increase over the past five years, it wants to more than double the regional rate for the next few years.

Dr Farry: I have two points to make. First, I freely recognise that more money is spent per capita on health provision in Northern Ireland than is spent elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The reason for that is, sadly, that we have greater health need per capita in Northern Ireland, and, therefore, the Budget allocations reflect that need. The Alliance Party's point is that, as a result of the current Budget, our inability to keep up with healthcare standards in the rest of the UK has led to our falling behind. We are flatlining.

Secondly, I made it clear that the Alliance Party does not have the resources or access to the detailed information that is needed to provide a fully costed Budget. However, I have sought to highlight three areas to do with income: first, the costs of a having a divided society must be dealt with, and no doubt we shall return to that point in our meeting with the Minister next week; secondly, possible efficiency savings must be highlighted; and, thirdly, a more responsible approach to the regional rate must be sought.

The Alliance Party has not sought, at this stage, to address how it would fund the underfunding of our public services. However, the several different income strands that we have set out for Northern Ireland can be dealt with.

Mr P Robinson: The Member has no shame whatsoever. He tells us that he does not possess the resources to garner together an argument, yet he states his approach as if it were fact. He has admitted that he does not have the resources at his disposal to realise what the real financial position is. Perhaps he should use Assembly facilities — Committee and Library resources — to obtain the facts so that he might return with answers. However, I suspect that to do so would scuttle his argument.

The Member accuses me of adopting a popular rather than an evidence-based approach. Let me give him that evidence. The increases under direct rule have been significantly higher than anybody in Northern Ireland should have been asked to bear. A 62% increase over the past five years is unacceptable, but the Member evidently does not think so. If we are to redress the balance, we are right to do what we have done — freeze rates. I would have thought that, after his recent radio broadcast, the Member would have recognised that people do not support his stance. I do not know what doors he has been knocking on, but people to whom I have spoken welcome the fact that they are to experience some relief from the massive rates hikes of previous years.

I listened to the contribution from the deputy leader of the Alliance Party. She should have listened to the old saying that one never refers to rope in the house of a hanged man. It was unwise for her to start to refer to manifestos. She has obviously forgotten that the Alliance Party's manifesto for the local government and Assembly elections stated that there should be rates reductions. Her party advised people to watch out for the parties that would be in Government, because they would attempt to hike the rates in Northern Ireland. The exact opposite has now happened; the parties in Government want to freeze the rates in Northern Ireland. The Alliance Party has torn the page out of its election manifesto and now wants to hike the rates in Northern Ireland.

I will take no lectures from her about the need to show consistency on the issue. She argues that to have a hike one day and a freeze the next day leads to a hike in the future.

She should know — if she does not, she should speak to her husband, who will tell her — that Castlereagh Borough Council has dealt with precisely those issues. That is why Castlereagh Borough Council has the lowest rates in Northern Ireland and the lowest increases. The council consistently gives the best value to its ratepayers through precisely the same programme that the Assembly is adopting. We cannot simply pull more money out of the pockets of the people of Northern Ireland.

Mrs Long: Will the Minister give way?

Mr P Robinson: I will be happy to give way to the Member in one second.

We will get the additional required resources by making efficiencies in the system. We will save £790 million through efficiencies. That is the way to do it, rather than asking for more money from people before we remove the waste from the system. People will welcome that policy.

Mrs Long: The Minister has drawn a parallel between his budgetary approaches for Castlereagh Borough Council and Northern Ireland. Will he concede that the difference is that, unlike in Castlereagh, where people can hop on a bus and go to Belfast to use the services that are provided there, people in Northern Ireland will not have the option to go elsewhere when times become difficult and service provision is low, as it has been in Castlereagh?

Mr P Robinson: If the Member knew a bit more about the subject, she would know that more people hop on buses to go to facilities in Castlereagh than the other way around. Recreation facilities in Castlereagh make money for the council, whereas facilities in Belfast lose money. The Member might wish to take some lessons from Castlereagh in that respect. The Member for East Antrim Mr Wilson found it so

difficult to pay the rates in Belfast that he decided to move to Larne, so Mrs Long should not try to egg him on to intervene in the debate.

Mrs Long raised the issue of unpredictability. How can she talk about the unpredictability of future rating when — for the first time ever — a Minister has given predictability to the business sector and to householders in Northern Ireland? We have told people what the regional rate will be for the next three years. That is total predictability until the end of the mandate of this Assembly. No previous Minister has offered householders or the business sector that degree of predictability so that they can plan their finances in the longer term. I would have thought that, instead of criticising that, the Member would have thanked the Executive for providing people with a longer run-in time in which to assess their finances for the next three years.

The Member for Strangford Mr Shannon mentioned what I will describe as a “horticulture allowance”, which would be an extension of the existing farmhouse allowance. The Member came to see me with one of his constituents, and he made a strong case. He pointed out the similarities between the horticulture and farming sectors. My officials have been tasked with assessing how widespread that issue is and examining ways in which we might best address it. Addressing the matter in the way in which the Member has suggested will probably require primary legislation. Therefore, my Department is gathering evidence, and officials have written to the Department of the Environment's Planning Service about the number of houses that have user restrictions imposed by the planning system for horticultural reasons.

I have covered the issues that were raised during the debate, and I hope that I have at least covered Members' substantive points. If, on reading Hansard, I discover some issue that I have not covered, I will write to the Member concerned.

1.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 79; Noes 8.

AYES

NATIONALIST

Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr Molloy, Ms Ni Chuilín,

*Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Ritchie,
Ms Ruane.*

UNIONIST

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne,
Mr Buchanan, Mr Burnside, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke,
Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds,
Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey,
Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Irwin,
Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland,
Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McFarland,
Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry,
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 Bresland and Mr Storey.

NOES

UNIONIST

Ms Purvis.

OTHER

*Dr Farry, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr McCarthy,
Mr Neeson, Mr B Wilson.*

Tellers for the Noes: Dr Farry and Mr McCarthy.

Total Votes 87 Total Ayes 79 [90.8%]

Nationalist Votes 31 Nationalist Ayes 31 [100.0%]

Unionist Votes 49 Unionist Ayes 48 [98.0%]

Other Votes 7 Other Ayes 0 [0.0%]

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

*That this Assembly approves the Rates (Regional Rates) Order
(Northern Ireland) 2008.*

**Rates (Industrial Hereditaments)
(Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008**

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

That this Assembly approves the Rates (Industrial Hereditaments) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008.

The Order will enable us to hold the rates for commercial premises at 30% for the next three years. It is a short but important Order that marks a significant break with the direct rule policy. The Order is a sign that devolution is delivering for the people of Northern Ireland. There are some who have said that devolution is no different than direct rule and that we may as well be governed from Westminster. However, those who wanted to see a continuation of direct rule, and the Labour Party setting policy in the Province, were playing a part in punishing the manufacturing sector and costing Northern Ireland much-needed jobs.

The agenda of this Administration is not the same as that of the direct rule Labour Government. Those who oppose devolution are supporting the return of a failed Labour Party policy in Northern Ireland. That agenda was to increase taxes on business: our agenda is to ensure better delivery from the public sector.

Making the economy the Executive's top priority is not only about words, but actions. Therefore, the Rates (Industrial Hereditaments) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 is not only important for the much-needed relief for the manufacturing sector but for the message that it sends from the Administration to those who want to do business in Northern Ireland.

The policy of industrial derating dates back to 1929. The decision to phase out that relief was announced in April 2003 by direct rule Ministers who wished to phase it out entirely. That process began on 1 April 2005, with full rates on industrial property due on 1 April 2011.

Members will be aware that, since then, there has been concern that the measure will have a detrimental effect on business. As a result, the Department of Finance and Personnel commissioned a review by the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland, which was published in early November 2007. I am grateful to the institute for its work, but, as its report emphasised, the decision on the level of industrial rates must lie with democratically elected politicians.

During the debate on the draft Budget, I announced that we should hold the current level of industrial rates at 30%. The Order will facilitate that until 2011, and changes will have to be made to primary legislation to deal with the issue beyond that date.

I have already stated that the Administration have set economic growth as a top priority. We must

demonstrate that to our manufacturing sector, and, by approving the Order, we will do precisely that. In making my decision in October, I was confident that the Assembly would support such a move, because I had read carefully the views expressed by all the parties during the June 2006 debate on freezing industrial rates, when the motion was passed unanimously.

I see that the Member for North Down is getting a little cautious — and so he should be, in case he takes the same line as he took in the Committee and hears quoted back to him some of the things that the Alliance Party and others said during that debate in June 2007.

2.00 pm

Furthermore, I am grateful to the Committee for Finance and Personnel and to the Executive, who have endorsed my position on both the policy and the draft legislation that I present to the House. Although it is not a perfect solution, few ways remain open to us to support local industry, given the extent to which our hands are tied by the European Union. In fact, EU state aid rules do not allow us to return to 100% derating.

With regard to the longer term, I hope to bring before the Assembly an amendment to the primary rating Order to deal with the situation after 2011 and to hold the level of industrial rates at 30% for the longer term. Our current provision is, to quote the ERINI report, a “blunt instrument”. Were we starting from scratch, we might not introduce such a provision; nevertheless, in providing relief to our manufacturing sector on an annual fixed cost, this Order will give industry some confidence in financial planning. We must give a positive signal at this time.

The ERINI study included a survey of manufacturing firms, which revealed what a significant number said they would do in the event of future rate increases. Approximately 25% thought that they would transfer production to locations outside Northern Ireland. Other consequences included abandoning or scaling down future expansion plans, as well as pay freezes or reducing employment. Most firms who responded said that full implementation of industrial rates would have adverse effects on employment, with a freeze on replacing employees who leave and restrictions on recruitment.

Given the tough time our manufacturing sector is experiencing, we cannot ignore the comments of those in the front line who, in partnership with Government, are creating wealth and revitalising our economy. Equally, when there are serious issues of political and administrative bureaucracy to address, we should not ask the business sector to pay for such inefficiency.

I shall briefly describe each of the articles of the Order. Article 1 provides the title of the Order and gives its operational date as the day following that of its affirmation by this Assembly. Article 2 amends the current provision in schedule 7 to the Rates (Northern

Ireland) Order 1977, which provides the level of industrial rates for the next three financial years. The level will be 30% of the net annual value of for each of those years. The current levels set out in the legislation are 50% for the year beginning 1 April 2008, and 75% for the years beginning 1 April 2009 and 1 April 2010.

I commend the Order to the Assembly.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Storey):

I thank the Minister for bringing the motion to the House. The purpose of the statutory rule is to determine that the non-domestic rates on an industrial property will be assessed on 30% of its net annual value over the next three financial years from April 2008. Members will be aware that, when devolution returned, the Minister of Finance and Personnel decided to await the outcome of ERINI’s review of industrial derating before taking any decision on the issue.

Having studied ERINI’s preliminary report, and in light of ERINI’s assessment that to phase out derating would indeed pose a risk to some of our manufacturing firms, the Minister announced as part of his draft Budget statement that the current level of rates would be held at 30% over the next three years.

Following the Minister’s announcement, both DFP officials and ERINI briefed the Committee on 14 November 2007 as part of the Committee’s consideration of the draft Budget. The Committee considered the proposal carefully and concluded in its report as follows:

“The proposal to freeze industrial rate liability at 30% across the Budget period is in keeping with the increased focus on the economy. However, [...] the ERINI report found little evidence to suggest that full industrial rating would lead to a collapse in manufacturing with substantial loss of output and jobs beyond existing trends in the sector. [...] ERINI also suggested that proceeding to a 50% liability would incur only a relatively small risk to industry as a whole.”

The Committee, therefore, noted in its report on the draft Budget:

“scope exists for a future review of the 30% liability.”

However, it supported the Minister in proposing the retention of the 30% manufacturing liability for the time being.

The Committee emphasised in its report that, though mindful that industrial derating represents one of the few fiscal tools at the Executive’s disposal, it considered this policy to be:

“outdated and a blunt instrument in terms of promoting economic development and sustainability in the long term.”

The Committee therefore formally recommended that DFP further consider:

“the scope for modifying the industrial derating scheme in the longer term to encourage increased business activity in areas which would lead to higher productivity”

such as research and development and exporting marketing.

In the event that the scheme could not be modified without contravening EC state aid rules, the Committee further agreed to support ERINI's suggestion that the Executive take:

"the opportunity afforded by the review of industrial derating to build a new concordat between industry and Government which will specify what each can expect from the other in obligation and support."

DFP's response to the Committee's report on the draft Budget is being presented to the Committee on 12 March. Members will look forward to what is being proposed in relation to this recommendation.

In relation to the provisions in the statutory rule, DFP officials briefed the Committee on the proposals on 6 February and the Committee formally considered the rule on 20 February. At that meeting, a motion to recommend that the rule be affirmed by the Assembly was approved by a majority vote of the Committee. As the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, I therefore support the motion.

Mr Beggs: The Ulster Unionist Party and I support the retention of industrial rating at 30% and oppose the escalator that had been implemented in the direct rule Ministers' legislation. In the last couple of years I have visited a number of industrial sites, and I have learned that the increased cost of rates for industrial manufacturing companies would result in a reduction of R&D and put at risk future investment in sizeable plants, and even smaller ones. Ultimately, it would reduce employment. This is a real issue; it is not a theoretical question as to whether it would have an effect or not. Anyone who speaks to most of the companies in Northern Ireland will understand that they have to make profits in order to spend money on R&D and make investments in the future. In Committee, the Alliance Party opposed the freeze at 30%. I warn the public, and Alliance voters, that the implementation of that policy would be unfortunate. I support the retention of rating at 30%.

There are a limited number of things that this Assembly can do, with immediate effect, to improve the prospects of local companies. The Varney Review II is under way, and we all hope that it will identify some tax changes to assist the local economy. This matter is within our remit and control, and so I urge the Assembly, particularly in the run-up to the investment conference in May, to give a clear direction that it wishes to encourage private business. That will mean real jobs in the economy. For that reason, I support the motion.

Mr O'Loan: I agree with the Minister that our manufacturing industry requires support. Although this measure is a blunt instrument, it is one of the few available to the Minister. Manufacturing requires long-term assurances, and the ERINI report recommended

that, whatever the level struck, industrial rates should be held for several years. Therefore, I support the Minister when he refers to considering the long term.

My only one concern, which I expressed in the Committee, is that an issue raised in the ERINI report has not been adequately addressed. It is not my intention to allow that to cause a Division; on the contrary, I support the Order's intention to freeze industrial rates at 30%.

I mentioned that point during the Budget debate, and I quoted from the ERINI report. In essence, when gathering industry evidence, ERINI's experience, particularly with the manufacturing industry, was that the relationship between industry and Government was poor and that industry was not understood and supported. I therefore welcome the emphasis on that matter from the Deputy Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee, Mr Storey. The Committee's 'Report on the Executive's Draft Budget 2008-2011' states:

"The Committee recommends that DFP considers further the scope for modifying the industrial derating scheme in the longer term to encourage increased business activity in areas which lead to higher productivity (e.g. research & development, export marketing). In the event that the scheme cannot be modified directly without contravening EC state aid rules, the Committee would support the approach, suggested in the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland (ERINI) report, of the Executive taking the opportunity of the review of industrial derating to build a new concordat between industry and government, which will specify what each can expect from the other in obligation and support."

To that end, I call for action from the Assembly, and, given that ERINI's report came first to the Department of Finance and Personnel and that the Committee has expressed its desire for the Department to play a role, it clearly must do so. In addition, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) are also fundamentally involved. All those Departments must acknowledge that a real need exists and begin to put in place measures that might create such a concordat. Forming a new relationship between industry and Government is not just a task for Government; the manufacturing industry also has a responsibility.

The Northern Ireland Manufacturing Focus Group campaigned powerfully on industrial derating, and it now has an opportunity, and a challenge, to do a much more interesting and, in the long term, significant job, which will be to work alongside the Government here in order to put the manufacturing industry in a better position to compete in the global marketplace.

Dr Farry: It always strikes me as a paradox that we debate Private Members' Business for hours, with many Members contributing, whereas, when it comes to discussing formal legislation and making it a reality, the debates are rather limited. I recognise that both the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP have contributed a

little more to this debate than they did to the last; however, I note that Sinn Féin members have still to speak, and I hope that that will be addressed later. It is important that these matters are not only debated by the Alliance Party and the DUP and that other parties nail their colours to the mast.

The Alliance Party has major concerns about this statutory rule, and there is neither a sound economic nor financial rationale behind the policy articulated by the Minister.

In his introductory remarks, he articulated a very selective reading of the ERINI report. It is worth noting that the report suggested that it was safe to raise the level to 50% and that the risks would be minimal. It pointed out that not doing so would lead to opportunity costs for the public purse and for wider economic policy. ERINI also raised concerns about the nature of the survey that it conducted with the manufacturers.

2.15 pm

Industrial derating is an old-fashioned and outmoded form of industrial support, as the Deputy Chairperson of the Finance Committee recognised in his opening remarks. It was introduced on a UK-wide level in 1929, the year of the Great Depression — although I am not sure whether there is a direct link between those two events. The practice was phased out in England in 1963 and in Scotland in 1995, and few other modern economies deploy it. Thus it is an old-fashioned form of support. It is too much of a blunt instrument to be effective. It is not about creating a modern economy; frankly, it is about preserving what we have rather than trying to rebalance the economy and engage with the new global realities.

There have been comments on the Varney Review's very sound analysis of the situation in Northern Ireland — although its recommendations were not overly sound. It is worth noting that it does not view industrial derating as a major advantage to the Northern Ireland economy. I am concerned about remarks that have been made about this policy being critical as we look towards the investment conference. Frankly, industrial derating is not a major issue for investors. They want to see a modern-looking, forward-thinking economic policy, not one that is designed to hold back the tide of international trends.

Mr Beggs: The Member has said that he believes that the policy is not critical. Does he accept that as well as determining whether there will be new investment from foreign direct investors, this policy can impact on where existing companies invest? Many Northern Ireland companies are linked to sister companies in other parts of the United Kingdom or in the Republic of Ireland. Whether those companies decide to invest will be determined by a range of factors. Regrettably, our energy and transports costs are generally slightly

higher than the costs in the rest of the United Kingdom. Does the Member accept that, in order to ensure that there will be continued investment in R&D and plant — thereby making our economy efficient — it is important to encourage existing local companies that operate in Northern Ireland?

Dr Farry: I would encourage the Member to read the ERINI report. It sets out that the major cost issues facing manufacturing in Northern Ireland are labour, transport and energy. Property is quite far down the list. The analysis from ERINI — and also in the regional forecasts — pointed out that the level of risk was quite minimal in that respect. If the argument is being made that this policy should be in place as some sort of counter-subsidy for our energy, transportation and labour costs, the answer is to address those problems rather than allow this policy to create a further problem.

As regards the investment conference, rather than look backwards, it is important to look to the future competitiveness of Northern Ireland and how well it sells itself. The policy is not an effective way of attracting foreign direct investment or of engaging with the global economy.

It is also worth reflecting that industrial derating applies to some sectors of the economy but not others. Some commercial activities benefit, while others do not. That in itself is not fair, but it also begs the question as to whether the correct sectors are being subsidised. Indeed, while manufacturing contributes a considerable amount of gross value added (GVA) to the Northern Ireland economy, it is worth noting that many of the potentially higher GVA-producing activities would not be covered by the industrial derating policy. In that respect, it does not help to rebalance the economy and to encourage those GVA conversions that the Executive are rightly talking about.

The EU market rules mean that industrial derating would be classified as a form of state aid. Industrial derating is permitted only as a legacy policy that predates the UK's accession to the European Union.

Mr Hamilton was handing out quite a lot of labels this morning, particularly in my direction. The DUP and the other parties that have been vocal in supporting that policy are effectively defending an industrial policy that is old fashioned and that has an element of statism about it. The Alliance Party is articulating a pro-market and liberal approach. When I was speaking during the previous debate, I was also reflecting a liberal approach to economics.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member tell the House what industrial experience any member of the Alliance Party has? I have rarely heard such an amount of drivel from people who do not know what they are talking about. Dr Farry has rehashed issues that have been gone over and over again.

Had he talked to people, he would understand the challenges that the manufacturing industry is faced with. He simply does not understand what he is talking about when he refers to sunset industries and so on.

The key challenge facing Northern Ireland is productivity. The only area that enhances productivity is manufacturing. The GVA is £49,000 per employee. Dr Farry is completely wrong. Will he please tell Members what he bases his arguments on?

Dr Farry: It was a relief that towards the end of his intervention Mr McCrea got round to some points of actual substance, as opposed to simply engaging in abuse. The Member should read the ERINI report, which was commissioned by the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Although I have stated that the manufacturing industry makes a considerable contribution to GVA, the Member is ignorant in making the comment that only manufacturing contributes to productivity. That statement is patently false. If the Member had any understanding of the nature of the UK economy —

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think that there is a misunderstanding, and I ask that the Member withdraws his remarks. I actually talked about productivity increases. I did not say that manufacturing was the only contributor to productivity. Perhaps the Member should listen more carefully.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Hansard report can be read to clarify that.

Dr Farry: That was more of a point of information under the guise of a point of order.

The biggest increase in GVA in the UK economy over the past 10 years has come in the areas of financial services, which have become the main driver of productivity across the UK. Although some aspects of the service sector produce low GVA, other aspects produce high GVA.

Therefore, I am suggesting that although it is important that Northern Ireland continues to have a strong manufacturing presence, it is also important that the economy is further balanced by appealing to a wider range of activities.

It is important to consider the differences between the Northern Ireland economy and that of the Republic of Ireland and the nature of economic activity in both jurisdictions. Radical changes have occurred in the Republic of Ireland over the past 20 years. Unfortunately, few changes have taken place in Northern Ireland during the same period.

The arguments for the retention of the policy are weak, and that was highlighted in Mr Storey's opening remarks. The ERINI report stated that:

“if Northern Ireland was starting from a clean sheet and could choose what form of support to provide for industry there is not the slightest possibility that we would suggest adopting a policy of industrial derating”.

That is an important point.

The main argument for retention is essentially about the alleged damage that could otherwise be caused to the economy. Of course manufacturing is still an important element of the local economy. The fear is that an increase in industrial rating will have a negative impact on employment and output. Although that may be the case in some areas, the analysis from ERINI and Regional Forecasts Ltd suggests that those dangers are significantly overstated; they are perceptions rather than realities.

It is forecast that, at a rating of 50%, no more than 10% of companies would face rates bills that equate to more than 15% of their profits. Labour, transportation and energy costs are bigger issues for industry. Some may argue that although, under EU state rules, industrial derating cannot be introduced, it is permitted as a legacy policy. Therefore, if Northern Ireland were to reduce the level of subsidy to manufacturing, it could not return to the current policy.

The biggest risk lies in not changing policies. The more responsible approach is to seek to rebalance the economy — not to preserve the status quo. There is a risk involved in not taking the opportunity to do so using the available resources.

Industrial derating of 30% produces £22 million per annum, and full derating would produce approximately £70 million per annum. The Alliance Party proposes a level of 50%, as suggested by ERINI, as the more responsible approach. That would produce a further £13 million per annum for the local economy, which equates to approximately £40 million over the period of the incoming Budget.

The critical economic argument is that the lost resources and income could be better invested in economic drivers for the general good of the economy, including manufacturing. I am not a fan of selective financial assistance, but the ERINI report makes it clear that investing resources in that way would be a more effective means of providing financial support to the economy.

At a more general level, the central issue in relation to business taxation is corporation tax. Members often talk about foreign direct investment. An adjustment in the rate of corporation tax would greatly transform the economy. The Alliance Party remains concerned by the lack of fiscal and tax-varying powers that could be used wisely to modernise and rebalance the local economy and address the regional disparities in the UK economy and the economic imbalances on the island of Ireland.

It is worth nothing that the Executive seem to have given up the fight when it comes to corporation tax. No statement has been made to the Assembly either by the Executive or the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members are aware that Question Time begins at 2.30 pm and nothing — not even Dr Farry — will get in the way of that. Dr Farry, you may continue your contribution after Question Time, when you will be called to speak again. Members, please take your ease until 2.30 pm, when Question Time will begin with questions to the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

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

Lifetime Opportunities Strategy

1. **Mr McCartney** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail when a decision will be made in relation to the lifetime opportunities strategy. (AQO 2374/08)

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): The Executive's commitment to tackling poverty is clearly outlined in public service agreement (PSA) 7 in the Programme for Government entitled 'Making People's Lives Better'. The PSA includes challenging commitments to work towards a 50% reduction in child poverty in Northern Ireland by 2010 and its elimination by 2020.

In line with its statutory obligation under section 16 of the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, the Executive Committee will soon receive proposals for the adoption of a strategy to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation in Northern Ireland based on objective need. First, however, the adoption proposals will be presented to the OFMDFM Committee in advance of the Executive Committee's considerations.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Chéad-Aire, as an fhreagra sin. Did the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister take into account the recommendations of the all-party Preparation for Government Committee when devising the strategy?

The First Minister: Our ears are open to all. All suggestions that are fed into OFMDFM will be considered seriously, as they need to be. We hope to produce a plan that is acceptable and that is capable of achieving the objectives.

Mr McClarty: The lifetime opportunities strategy was introduced in 2006 against a background in which 327,000 people live in poverty, of whom 102,000 are children and 54,000 are pensioners. With those sobering figures in mind, will the First Minister explain what he will do to offset the effect of his new water tax and rates increases on the life opportunities of the poorest people in the community, while some of his millionaire friends have their rates capped at £400,000?

The First Minister: I must point out that I have introduced no new water tax. I do not know where the Member got the idea that I have produced some new water tax. I wish that I had a bucket of cold water to pour over him so that he might make sensible remarks in the House. All that I can say to him is that the Assembly cannot heal the sore of poverty overnight. There must be a proper plan and the ability to put that plan into operation in order to achieve everyone's goal.

Ms Lo: Many of the policy strategies that were adopted under direct rule have been shelved or abandoned. Would it not be better to review and amend those policies rather than simply abandon them?

The First Minister: I assure the Member that she can bring any such amendments before the House and we will listen to what she has to say.

European Engagement

2. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the progress made in ensuring that Northern Ireland is effectively engaged in relevant European bodies and committees, in order to maximise available financial benefits.

(AQO 2327/08)

The First Minister: From its inception, President Barroso's task force has presented a considerable opportunity to enhance Northern Ireland's participation in European Union initiatives, both financial and non-financial. Tremendous support and co-operation has been shown to the Assembly by the European institutions, in particular the Commission. The task force's work is well advanced.

Ministers have visited Brussels to keep the interest of key decision-makers, influential people and the European Commission. We are also using those contacts to ramp up our European engagement, and that is not just about financial benefits; it is about building networks, participating in programmes and enhancing the exchange of experience and expertise.

The Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels builds and strengthens contacts with a wide range of Brussels-based organisations, member-state representatives and other regional offices. It also raises our positive profile at major events in Brussels such as the Open Days initiative, whereby organisations across all sectors are informed of the opportunity to work with partnership organisations throughout the European Union.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the First Minister for his answer and his efforts that secured the support of the European Commission for the task force and its work. Will he inform the House when the task force will publish its findings?

The First Minister: I hope to receive the task force's draft report soon. Following a technical assessment of its recommendations, the European Commission will engage with Ministers in the spring to discuss our response. Junior Ministers will oversee that work, including the preparation of our formal response to the report's findings and recommendations. The monitoring of actions plans and reporting against targets will be ongoing.

The Executive have a key role in ensuring that all Departments play a full part in Northern Ireland's constructive and beneficial engagement with Europe.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the First Minister for his reply. I welcome the junior Minister to his first Question Time — he is, of course, a former colleague of mine.

Since May 2007, what steps has the First Minister taken to engage Northern Ireland as a region within Europe and create direct links with the EU, as opposed to national links through Whitehall, which have not always served Northern Ireland well?

The First Minister: I remind the Member that we have spoken to people at the highest level, such as the European commissioners, and successfully got a representative from Northern Ireland onto one of the main bodies in Europe — Northern Ireland will now have a direct input into that body. We are doing our best to build every bridge to Europe that we can, and we trust that it will not be a one-way street and that member states will start to bring some of their good things to Northern Ireland.

Mr P J Bradley: I also welcome Mr Donaldson, as a former resident of south Down, in his new role.

What arrangements does OFMDFM have for working with the MEPs from Northern Ireland?

The First Minister: The Northern Ireland MEPs are entitled to be heard; however, I wish that some of them were heard in Europe and not in Northern Ireland.

50% Remission

3. **Mr Neeson** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the discussions it has had with the Northern Ireland Office in relation to ending the automatic 50% remission for prisoners.

(AQO 2293/08)

The First Minister: The ending of automatic 50% remission for prisoners is a reserved matter. That, therefore, is a decision for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to make.

I wish that I had the power to make the decision on the matter, but unfortunately, I do not. However, the Member will be aware that last November the

Northern Ireland Office published for consultation the draft Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008. Among the proposals in the draft Order is that to end automatic 50% remission on custodial sentences. Earlier last month, we advised the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland of our support for that proposal.

Mr Neeson: Does the First Minister agree that there is widespread concern and alarm throughout the whole community in Northern Ireland about automatic 50% remission? Does he agree that changes to legislation should be introduced sooner rather than later, particularly where violent crime is concerned?

The First Minister: I agree with the Member. However, we do not have the power to change the legislation. Nevertheless, we can make representations to the Secretary of State, and, as I have said, we have already done so, and we will continue to do so.

Mr McNarry: Given that the First Minister has stated that automatic 50% remission is a reserved matter, he should note that in December 2006, the then Minister with responsibility for criminal justice, David Hanson, announced that in future the courts would determine the period that is spent in custody. That time must be completed in full and without remission before the offender is released under licence. Some 15 months later, it would be good to know whether that new situation applies in Northern Ireland. If it does not, can the First Minister find out why?

The First Minister: That subject has been discussed with the Secretary of State. I will write to the honourable Member as to the current position on that.

Mr Storey: The devolution of policing and justice has caught the public imagination recently. Given the many calls, demands and threats that have been made about that issue, can the First Minister assure the House that it will not be addressed until there is confidence in the community?

The First Minister: There will be no devolution of policing and justice until there is sufficient community confidence. That has been stated clearly to the Secretary of State and to the Prime Minister. The Member is aware of the triple lock that the British Government put on that matter. He is also aware that at no time did my party say at St Andrews — or anywhere else — that it would move quickly on that matter. Many issues have yet to be completed to give confidence to the entire community that the time has come to devolve policing and justice.

PSA Targets for Children

4. **Mrs O'Neill** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the recent changes made to PSA targets for children, as a result of

the funding allocation for children and young people's priorities. (AQO 2378/08)

The First Minister: All our children will reap the benefits when we achieve our overarching Programme for Government aim of building:

“a peaceful, fair, and prosperous society in Northern Ireland, with respect for the rule of law and where everyone can enjoy a better quality of life”.

We do not underestimate the importance of the public service agreements that have been set in all Departments in order to work towards that aim. Our Department, through the junior Ministers, has a role in co-ordinating policy for children and young people. Changes have been made in some Departments' targets. There are several such changes, and, rather than take up time now, I will arrange for their details to be forwarded to the Member.

Those challenging targets relate to key departmental priorities and must be funded appropriately from the Budget allocations.

The three Departments most closely involved in providing services for children and young people, and which have received additional funding allocations in the Budget, are the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; the Department of Education; and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

2.45 pm

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. I look forward to receiving that information in writing. That was what I was going to ask in my supplementary question.

The First Minister: I will just say to the honourable lady that ensuring that children are cared for, live in safety, are protected from abuse and receive the support that they need to achieve their full potential becomes our aim, and we will work towards achieving those ends.

Mr Gardiner: What action is being taken by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that all Ministers make timely decisions on the allocation of resources for children and young people's priorities? Will the First Minister explain why his Department was found guilty of an underspend of £3.8 million, which was returned in the February monitoring round due to being unallocated from the children and young people's fund?

The First Minister: Junior Ministers have been given special responsibility for the co-ordination of policy and the promotion of the rights and needs of children and young people. They are driving forward children's issues; they are taking the lead in reviewing the 10-year strategy, and they will chair the newly reformed ministerial subcommittee. Junior Ministers have also had a series of engagements with several voluntary-sector organisations; they liaise with the

Commissioner for Children and Young People, and they will take part in a series of direct engagements with children and young people.

Junior Ministers will shortly submit a detailed work plan, outlining their proposed actions for the next 12 months. I will write to the honourable Member about his specific enquiry.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the First Minister confirm that, although there was additional money, there was no new money for children and young people in the Budget? Will he provide details about how Departments will be compelled to ring-fence money for children and young people's funding?

The First Minister: That is not a question for me, but for my friend the Rt Hon Peter Robinson, who is sitting beside me. I am sure that he will be glad to answer that question for the lady at any time.

Commissioner for Victims and Survivors

5. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the planned working relationship between the Department and the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors.

(AQO 2323/08)

The First Minister: We recently announced our decision to appoint four commissioners designate and to introduce legislation to establish a commission for victims and survivors. The commission will be independent of Government in its day-to-day operation. Our Department will sponsor the commission, and it is intended that a work programme, which will give a strategic context to their work, will be agreed with the commissioners.

Mr Hilditch: Will the First Minister inform the House of the position of the legislation that is required to establish the new victims' commission?

The First Minister: All I can say is that that matter is under consideration, and we hope that we will soon be in a position to sponsor the legislation in the House that will be necessary to carry out the objectives that we have in mind.

Mrs Long: In the same vein as the previous question, will the First Minister tell the House what planned working relationships within the commission for victims and survivors are envisaged by his Department? Will he give the House some indication about the status of the current victims' commissioners designate, who have been appointed but who do not have a legislative framework in which to work? What limitations, if any, does that place on their activities?

The First Minister: The legislation will deal with the matters that the honourable lady mentioned, and they need to be dealt with.

I regret that there is a hold-up, and I hope that it will be overcome as quickly as possible, so that the needs of those victims can be dealt with.

Mr Burnside: Will the First Minister corporately, on behalf of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, confirm that it is the opinion of that unitary office, that those who took part as members of proscribed, illegal, terrorist organisations — whether republican or loyalist — in the Troubles of the last 35 years will not be defined as victims or relatives, or receive taxpayers' money, and that the concentration of taxpayers' money that might be devoted to that purpose, will be for the innocent victims of terrorism and members of the security forces and their families?

The First Minister: I hope that the honourable Member will believe me this time. I have already answered that question, and I answered it as I have always done. We are talking about victims, and not about those who made them victims. It is the victims that we will look after.

European Funding

6. **Mr Campbell** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the steps being taken to ensure that all sections of the community are sufficiently resourced and informed to avail of future European funding.

(AQO 2312/08)

The First Minister: Equality of opportunity is an important issue for the Executive and for our society in Northern Ireland. The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), as managing authority for Peace II, is responsible for allocating EU Peace funding to eligible programmes, and for maintaining a high level of public awareness, among all sections of the community, of Peace II funding. To that end, the Special EU Programmes Body will, again, strongly encourage funding applications from all sections of the community, through the delivery of awareness seminars and the provision of advice and guidance to prospective applicants. For the INTERREG IIIA programme, the Special EU Programmes Body will play a similar role, promoting the available funding opportunities.

Mr Campbell: It is pleasing to know that that will be done. The First Minister is aware of the problems that beset previous European funding applications, particularly for the unionist community, that may or may not have been due to the overtly political nature of the funding regime. Can he outline further steps that can be taken to ensure that all sections of the community benefit from European funding?

The First Minister: I agree that there have been difficulties in the past, and those must be solved. All sections of society must be safeguarded. When I was in the European Parliament, I advocated that a line should

be drawn on that matter, so that all sections of the community got their share of the money. We must now take steps to see that that arrangement can be put into operation for everyone, so that all can share in what comes from Europe.

Mr O’Loan: I am sure that the First Minister will join me in commending the Special EU Programmes Body for its successful efforts to ensure that all sections of the community have the capacity to apply for European funding. Will he confirm that programmes will be designed and allocations made solely on the basis of objective need?

The First Minister: I give the Member that assurance. The Minister of Finance and Personnel has had talks with Mr Cowen from Dublin on those matters, as far as they concern both parts of this island.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the First Minister for the content of his answer. Will he look at the possibility of developing rural EU networks, with a view to using EU funding to enhance rural development and to help address the social, employment and educational disadvantage created by remoteness?

The First Minister: Yes. I would like to receive further correspondence from the Member on that matter so that we can take it up and push on with it as quickly as possible.

Lisanelly Site, Omagh

7. **Mr McElduff** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the efforts it is making to secure the transfer to the Executive of the Lisanelly Ministry of Defence military site in Omagh. (AQO 2383/08)

The First Minister: OFMDFM continues to press the British Government strongly about the transfer of Lisanelly and other military sites to the Executive. We are waiting for a response from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. We recently met the Secretary of State to discuss that important issue, and we clearly set out our view that an MOD requirement for the Executive to purchase such sites at market value is a retraction from the joint declaration position. Furthermore, we pointed out the substantial impact that such an approach will have on our investment capacity, and we asked for the Secretary of State’s urgent personal intervention and support. Clearly, we want to see whether the Secretary of State is able to persuade his colleagues that the sites can be purchased at market value. The availability of funding for Government to deliver any development proposals at redundant military bases is a major difficulty. We will press the issue again shortly — directly with the Prime Minister if need be.

Mr McElduff: I welcome the First Minister’s answer, and I acknowledge that he and his office are taking the matter seriously. I want to ensure that OFMDFM continues to intervene in that way because considerable influence must be exerted in respect of the project.

Will the First Minister join me in applauding the efforts of educationalists, the local government sector in Omagh, and the MP for West Tyrone, who are centrally involved in trying to make that project a reality?

The First Minister: I was going to ask the Member what the MLA for West Tyrone was doing about that matter. *[Laughter.]*

OFMDFM is of the mind that this is an urgent matter and that the promises that were made by the then Chancellor — who is now the Prime Minister — that we would benefit from the sale of those properties must be kept. The time for keeping promises has come, and we intend to push with all our might to get what we were promised.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Chéad-Aire cá huair a dhéanfar cinneadh i dtaobh athnuachan láithreán macasamhail na Ceise Faide agus bheairic Foircille.

Can the First Minister be more specific and tell the House when a decision will be made on the regeneration of such sites, including the Maze/Long Kesh site and Forkhill barracks?

The First Minister: I cannot give the Member dates in respect of those matters. The principle must first be established that we will benefit, and we must put our hearts and minds to that. The promise that was made by the British Government must be fulfilled, and the people of Northern Ireland must benefit from what happens to those sites.

3.00 pm

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Bluetongue

1. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of cases of bluetongue recorded in the East Derry/Londonderry constituency. (AQO 2284/08)

11. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the restrictions in

place for the importation of live animals from bluetongue-infected areas. (AQO 2353/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer question 1 and question 11 together.

I can confirm that there have been no cases of bluetongue in the East Derry constituency. Members are aware of the animal that was imported to a north Antrim farm, which, on post-import testing, gave a positive reaction to a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test, indicating the presence of the virus. A total of 30 animals have been culled as a consequence.

Preliminary scientific evidence from that case suggests that trans-placental transmission of the bluetongue virus may play a part in the spread of the disease. The findings of the Veterinary Service and AFBI have been supported by the community reference laboratory at Pirbright.

3.00 pm

The evidence for vertical and/or oral virus transmission was presented to a European Commission bluetongue expert working group on 27 February. As a result of discussions at that meeting, Commission authorities will now consider introducing proposals on controls, in addition to those in the EU Bluetongue Regulation (EC No 1266/2007), at the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health (SCoFCAH) meeting tomorrow. The emerging signs indicate that it is necessary to strengthen the controls in regulation 1266. However, the Commission will not introduce any additional controls ahead of tomorrow's meeting. In view of that, and in order to protect our cattle herd and sheep flock from the introduction of the bluetongue virus, I signed a declaration last week to temporarily suspend the import of female cattle over 12 months and female sheep over six months from bluetongue restriction zones. That preliminary action is pending the outcome of the SCoFCAH meeting and further evaluation of the scientific findings.

The suspension of imports came into effect at 6.00 pm on Saturday 1 March. The decision was taken by the Executive, and it will be reviewed this week. The suspension, which is in line with action taken in the South, does not include animals intended for direct slaughter. All other cattle and sheep imported for breeding and production from outside the island of Ireland are restricted on farms and tested at 10 and 30 days after arrival, as a matter of routine. Restrictions on subsequent movement are lifted only after receipt of clear test results.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister outline what steps her Department is taking, and what steps farmers may be able to take, in the fight against the spread of bluetongue?

Ms Gildernew: My Department has been proactive in the surveillance and monitoring of the situation as it has unfolded. The most decisive action that the Department could have taken was the recommendation to the Executive that we ban imports. Thankfully, that decision mirrors what the industry is doing. Some farming groups have already called on the industry to impose a voluntary ban on imports from bluetongue restriction areas. That is a good example of how we have worked together to try to protect the industry from this awful disease for as long as we can.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Minister for her initial response. Will she confirm that she has had discussions with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) about banning live animals from bluetongue-infected areas? Will she confirm that the action taken by the Executive last week — and recommended by her and her Department — is legal? If Northern Ireland were to suffer an outbreak of bluetongue and other countries in the EU banned Northern Ireland exports, what would the legal implications be?

Ms Gildernew: It is not helpful to deal with hypothetical questions, so at this stage we will deal with what we actually know. With regard to my discussions with DEFRA, we have been working at official level and I spoke to Ministers Hilary Benn and Jonathan Shaw last Thursday afternoon and told them the action that I was planning to take to the Executive that day. I discussed the issue with them, and we will keep in close contact with ministerial colleagues.

In taking the action that I took last week to suspend the importation of certain animals, I have given due regard to the fact that the EU Bluetongue Regulation (EC No 1266/2007) was introduced when vectors were perceived as the sole route of virus transmission. That science is now changing. The EU experts' group has considered the evidence from the north Antrim case, and the Commission will put a recommendation to SCoFCAH tomorrow to amend regulation 1266. Therefore, following a decision by the Executive last Thursday, I have invoked powers in domestic legislation to suspend imports of female cattle over 12 months and sheep over six months. The Executive will review the position after the meeting tomorrow. I trust and hope that this will only be a temporary, precautionary measure. My action, therefore, anticipates appropriate tightening of the EU rules.

It is also a proportionate response to the unfolding situation. The decision was made after the bluetongue expert working group meeting, because we awaited the outcome of that meeting before acting. We have, therefore, been measured and proportionate in our response, but we have acted decisively to protect the industry.

Mr P J Bradley: If it is decided that vaccination against bluetongue becomes the only option to stem the virus, will the Minister confirm that arrangements are in place to ensure that there is an adequate supply of vaccine available to meet local demand; that there will not be any delay in issuing a supply to our farms; and that some herd and flock sizes and location will not be prioritised at the expense of others?

Ms Gildernew: We are working with DEFRA and officials in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) to ascertain how best to respond to the situation, and we are talking about what to do if an outbreak is confirmed. That is hypothetical at this stage. However, we must keep the situation under review and act decisively.

As I said during the debate on 19 February, vaccination is permitted only when a disease is confirmed to be circulating in a country, and it may be administered in the protection and surveillance zones only. Thankfully, we are not in that position.

We are working closely with our counterparts in England, Scotland, Wales and the South to develop a vaccination strategy that will be appropriate to vaccinate against the spread of disease if the need arises. We are also continuing to monitor the situation carefully, and we will order vaccine if we consider that necessary. Vaccine has a limited shelf life. It is not available currently, and we want to be prudent and proportionate with regard to its purchase. However, we are keeping everything under constant review and acting accordingly.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that information. Will the Minister outline the details of compensation — or lack thereof — that will be paid to farmers who have bluetongue-infected animals, including those that were imported and those that are based locally?

Ms Gildernew: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is under no obligation to pay compensation for imported animals that have been affected by, or exposed to, the bluetongue virus, in accordance with The Diseases of Animals (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. That position has been made abundantly clear to the agriculture industry more times than I can remember, and it is supported by industry leaders.

If an infected animal was not imported from another country, compensation will be payable if the Department requires it to be slaughtered. Compensation for such affected animals is paid at 50% of the value of the animal, and compensation at 100% of the animal's value is paid on unaffected animals.

Northern Ireland Forest Service

2. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what her assessment is of the current policy of the Northern Ireland Forest Service in relation to recreation at sites under its management.

(AQO 2291/08)

Ms Gildernew: The new forestry strategy that was published in March 2006 recognises the importance of forests in providing public access, quiet enjoyment and recreation opportunities for local people and visitors. The strategy provides the policy framework for the Forest Service to make forests available to as many people as possible and to achieve that by working with partners who have similar interests.

There are up to two million visits per year to forests that fall within the remit of the Forest Service. The Forest Service operates six forest parks and many forests, all of which provide open public access and which are well used by walkers. Many of those forests also host events organised by local mountain biking and motor sports clubs, for example. The forest parks provide car-parking facilities and a range of activities, including graded and way-marked walking trails and family cycle trails. Furthermore, Castlewellan, Tollymore and Gosford offer pony trekking, camping and caravanning facilities. There are also scenic drives at Ballypatrick, Slieve Gullion and Lough Navar.

The Forest Service employs a number of forest guides to facilitate educational trips by schools and other groups. At Castlewellan Forest Park, the Forest Service has leased facilities to the Bluelough Adventure Centre — an outdoors adventure company that provides a range of activities, including water sports.

I want to see further development in the social use of forests, and, in that context, the Forest Service plans to publish a recreation strategy during the next business year, which will set out a policy on recreation in forests and a framework within which recreation provision can be taken forward.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her response. Given that the Forest Service appears to be keen to promote the use of forest parks, can the Minister explain why it has started to charge mountain-bike clubs £500 a day for running events? Those charges could wipe out the sport, as clubs cannot afford the fees.

Ms Gildernew: Forest Service imposes charges in order to maintain facilities such as paths and toilet blocks. It is hoped that we will be able to consider charging in the context of the recreation strategy and take the matter further. If the Member would like, I can come back to her with more detail about that part of the strategy.

Forests need to be used more broadly, and I would like them to be utilised fully. We are aware of the changing demands for and expectations of recreation, specifically the requirement to cater for more high-activity pursuits. The recreation strategy will take account of those demands and expectations, and we are working with other partnership arrangements on the matter. Proper maintenance must be provided in order to ensure a safe environment for the people who use those facilities, and such provision may result in Forest Service's imposing a cost. As I said, we will consider the matter carefully, and I can provide the Member with more details.

Mr Hamilton: I have raised the issue of motor-home facilities in our forest parks with the Minister in the past. I am sure that she is aware that a growing number of motor homes is being registered in Northern Ireland and that a vast number of people with motor homes visits Northern Ireland from across the water and elsewhere. I am aware that the Department is presently reviewing recreational provision, including facilities for motor homes. Will the Minister state what progress is being made on that review, and will she give any indication of what its likely conclusions will be?

Ms Gildernew: Obviously, we are working through the review. Officials are meeting with several like-minded groups in order to implement its recommendations, but it would probably be pre-emptive to comment further at this stage. I am happy to come back to the Assembly with the proposals at a later date when they have been better fleshed out.

Mr Gallagher: Is the Minister aware that some of the participants in the Department's forestry scheme have not received their annual payments? If so, can she tell us roughly when they can expect to receive them?

Ms Gildernew: The Member knows that that supplementary question does not relate in any way to the original question; however, I applaud his creativity.

In answer to his question, there have been administrative difficulties in getting those payments through, and we are hopeful that they can be made in the not-too-distant future.

Given that I answered the question, I congratulate the Member for using his imagination.

Rural Childcare

3. **Mr Brolly** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the improvements that have been made in relation to rural childcare.

(AQO 2330/08)

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. Under the 2001-06 rural development programme, 57 childcare

projects received funding, with the result that a total of 170 jobs were created or safeguarded. Some 54 projects were supported under various projects, including Building Sustainable Prosperity (BSP), LEADER+, Peace II, and Peace II extension measures, with a total allocation of just over £1.9 million. In addition, three cross-border projects received funds amounting to €15,000 under Peace II measure 5.6a. Childcare initiatives will also be eligible for funds under the new rural development programme for 2007-13.

However, I am conscious that women living in rural areas still face a barrier to accessing proper childcare. For that reason, I set up a stakeholder group to examine the key issues that relate to rural childcare provision. That group is chaired by the chief executive of NIPPA, which is the early years organisation, and the remainder of the group is made up of representatives from various organisations with an interest in, or knowledge of, rural childcare issues.

Importantly, the group also includes representatives from other relevant Departments, such as OFMDFM and the Department of Education, to ensure that other relevant strategies are taken into account. The group has been examining circumstances in rural areas that affect childcare, such as accessibility and transport difficulties, childcare models that are already working in rural areas, and the cost of childcare.

One of the group's most important emerging findings is the isolation of some rural communities regarding access to facilities that others take for granted, such as affordable and accessible childcare, and transport to and from school for children. I have received the group's draft report, I am considering its recommendations on how current and future provision can be improved, and I expect the final report to be available within a few weeks. I will want to discuss those recommendations with other Departments and with Executive colleagues to ensure that a joined-up approach is taken to overcome some of the childcare difficulties that people in rural areas face. That approach will, in turn, make a huge difference to families who live in rural areas.

3.15 pm

Mr Brolly: Will the Minister tell us why her Department is responsible for childcare in rural areas?

Ms Gildernew: Access to proper childcare facilities is a must for all parents. One of my roles as Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is to be a champion for rural areas and to ensure that rural dwellers have equitable access to facilities. Rural childcare is also a priority for me, because it underpins economic and social sustainability in rural areas. The Rural Stakeholders Forum was established to examine current rural childcare provision and to suggest possible solutions to highlighted difficulties.

Of course, childcare is not solely my responsibility. Other Departments have strategies and actions in place that deal with childcare issues, but my focus, and the focus of the report and any subsequent DARD action, is on rural childcare and on ensuring that those in need in rural areas have the same opportunities that are afforded to those in urban areas. I shall be working with other Departments that have responsibilities in that area to ensure that rural issues are included in their policies and strategies, and to ensure that — collectively — we work to improve childcare in rural areas.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her detailed response to the first question. Although I welcome the figures that she outlined clearly for us, it would seem, from what she said, that the need for improvements has not been totally met. She is well aware that one of the priorities of the Executive and Assembly is to tackle child poverty. The lack of rural childcare is one problem that leads to child poverty. Has the Minister set aside enough finance to assist rural childcare opportunities, especially since the Executive have set that priority but also because need exists?

Ms Gildernew: DARD has received an allocation of £10 million to tackle poverty and social exclusion in rural areas over the next CSR period. That will provide us with the opportunity to work with others inside and outside Government to deal with a range of issues that affect rural areas, including rural childcare.

I agree that if we enable people to return to work or to get back into training or education, they can improve their economic status. The two go together, and I am very pleased that we have £10 million with which to tackle poverty in rural areas. Of course, we would love to have more, but £10 million well spent will make a real difference.

Mr McFarland: Most of Northern Ireland is considered to be rural, so will the Minister more clearly define “rural childcare”? Can she tell us which children qualify as being “rural”?

Ms Gildernew: Has the Member got all day? A great deal is contained in that question. Four out of 10 people live in rural areas. That figure means that four out of 10 children also live in rural areas. For children who live near towns, where there is a critical mass, childcare facilities can be made available where there are enough children to make them worthwhile. Difficulties in rural areas include isolation, lack of registered childminders, and people not having access to childcare voucher schemes.

Although I have the draft report only at this stage, it contains a number of recommendations on how to tackle rural childcare. People who live in Derrygonnelly, Aghyarn or Rathfriland need access to quality, affordable childcare. Discussions are ongoing with the Department for Social Development, which believes that populations

under 4,500 are defined as rural. That accounts for a significant section of the population. An emphasis must be placed on rural issues and on how we facilitate services, and service providers, in rural areas to ensure that people have the same access to services as those who live in towns.

Reducing Bureaucracy

4. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give a timescale within which the group, established by her Department and the Department of the Environment to reduce bureaucracy, will report; and to detail any progress to date. (AQO 2362/08)

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. The review panel, as a result of a number of meetings that it has held with stakeholders and departmental officials, now has a measure of its task. A questionnaire has been issued to stakeholders that seeks evidence of over-regulation and their assessment of which regulations that DARD and the Department of the Environment are placing on the agrifood industry are unnecessarily burdensome. Once the responses to the questionnaire have been analysed, the review panel proposes to conduct workshops — bringing together stakeholders, policy-makers and inspectors — to explore the issues raised and to identify where there is scope to reduce the administrative burden on the industry. Those workshops will be conducted at the beginning of April.

The panel anticipates that it will be able to complete that stage of the work by the end of May 2008 and will spend June drafting its final report, which it expects to publish by the middle of July 2008. As I told the House previously, the targets that have been set are 25% by 2013 and an interim target of 15% by 2011.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Given that 2011 and 2013 are a long way off, what is the Minister doing in the short term to reduce red tape and bureaucracy? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Gildernew: The review will result in a plan that will make recommendations for the simplification of administrative processes, aimed at maintaining policy effectiveness and public accountability and identifying areas where the associated administrative burdens can be reduced. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of the Environment will then develop action plans to implement the recommendations outlined in the simplification plan. I anticipate that some recommendations can be implemented reasonably quickly but that others will take longer. Every effort will be made to deliver the benefits as quickly as possible, and farmers will see the benefits long before 2013.

Mr Buchanan: Why has it taken the Minister so long to identify bureaucracy savings in her Department when overstaffing and bureaucratic inefficiency is so apparent? Does the Minister really believe that it is not possible to identify savings in a system that needs up to nine officials, and takes nine months, to process a single farm payment application?

Ms Gildernew: The Member will agree that farmers find it difficult to deal with the fact that many of the Department's regulations come from Europe. The Department needs to consider how it can reduce bureaucracy and the administrative burden on farmers, and it is discussing ways to achieve that with EU officials. One of the first things that the Department did as a result of the Ulster Farmers' Union's (UFU) Cut it Out campaign was to address bureaucracy. Although the Department took some time to agree the composition of the panel with the Department of the Environment, it is now working, and we will soon see positive results. However, we cannot solve all problems immediately.

Mr Burns: The reduction of paperwork is one of the five basic recommendations outlined in the UFU's 'Five Steps to a Better Future' to cut down on red tape in the farming industry. Can the Minister tell us how many of the five recommendations she has implemented to date?

Ms Gildernew: Work on four of the five recommendations is ongoing, and they are works in progress. I examined, and consulted widely on, the Agricultural Wages Board, and I decided that I would not progress that recommendation.

Communications Courses at Loughry College and Students Studying at Agricultural Colleges

5. **Mrs O'Neill** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the reasons for her Department's plans to withdraw the Master of Science communications course at Loughry College; and what plans it has to hold discussions with the Department for Employment and Learning in order to retain this course in the Cookstown/Tyrone area. (AQO 2365/08)

6. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the number of full-time students who are currently studying at agricultural colleges. (AQO 2260/08)

13. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the reasons for ending all undergraduate and postgraduate communications courses at Loughry College. (AQO 2360/08)

Ms Gildernew: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 5, 6 and 13 together. To put the

issue in context and in response to question 6, the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) enrolled 1,561 students in October 2007 across its three campuses at Enniskillen, Loughry and Greenmount. Of those students, 641 are full-time and 920 are part-time.

In response to questions 5 and 13, no decision has been taken to end any of CAFRE's courses. A proposal has been made to withdraw the undergraduate and postgraduate communications courses at the Loughry campus. That proposal reflects the budgetary pressures that my Department and other Departments face under the new Programme for Government. The proposal to cease the communications courses has raised several queries from Members as well as CAFRE students. I have received an invitation to meet students, and I hope to do so on Wednesday 5 March. My officials attended a Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development meeting to discuss the issue, and I subsequently asked them to consult the key stakeholders. I will take on board the views of CAFRE students and other key stakeholders in making my decision.

Over the next year, my Department will be implementing an ambitious work programme, which will include the roll-out of the new rural development programme and a series of anti-poverty measures. All of that must take place on top of our existing workload, and, at the same time, we must accommodate major efficiency savings of £6 million, £12 million and £18 million across the next three years. Although the future of the communication course programmes might not lie in DARD given the current priorities, I have written to the Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey, to seek a meeting with him as they might fit better in the mainstream provision that is provided by the Department for Employment and Learning.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the fact that the Minister has plans to meet with students in the coming week. If the decision were taken to withdraw the communication course programmes, where would that leave Loughry College?

Ms Gildernew: Loughry campus will continue to offer a range of education and training programmes focused on meeting the needs of the local food industry. Graduates from the campus have good employment prospects and I encourage any young person who is interested in a career in the food industry to consider Loughry as their place of study. The Member and I live quite close to Loughry and we know the type of work that the college does. Loughry's position in mid-Ulster is no coincidence: there are many high-profile food companies in the area, and Loughry provides a range of well-trained graduates who are eminently capable of working in the industry. Loughry is a huge benefit to the Department and I have every confidence in the college.

Mr Bresland: There is considerable concern in the farming community about the future of the agricultural colleges. Will the Minister confirm whether her Department has a long-term strategy for the provision of full-time agriculture courses in Northern Ireland?

Ms Gildernew: Absolutely: yes. Agriculture courses, particularly the third-level education element, should be in my Department's remit. We have an unshakeable commitment to deliver courses that will help to support our agrifood and agriculture industries.

Mr I McCrea: I am concerned that the communication course programmes are being removed from the Loughry campus, especially as the college has helped to fashion a generation of agrifood leaders and advisers in the agriculture industry. We would have been better served had the Minister first consulted the local community on whether the course needed to close, rather than act first and talk later.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member ask his question?

Mr I McCrea: Given that the Minister is going to meet the students, will she give an assurance that she will consider their views and, if need be, reinstate the course?

Ms Gildernew: First, the decision on the course has not yet been taken. To implement the ambitious programme of work that is planned for my Department, which includes the 'Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007-2013', significant planning is required, and on that my officials are engaged. Discussions on the proposal to withdraw the communication course programmes are ongoing, including with the trade union side. Officials met the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and I have asked them to consult widely with key stakeholders. I am meeting students later in the week. Firm decisions will be taken only when their full implications have been assessed, including consideration of equality implications. If — and at this stage it is an "if" — the proposals are adopted, anyone at present on a communications course will be finishing their study. This is not something that is happening today, or next week, or next month. We are looking at the issue but everyone who is on that course will get the chance to finish it.

3.30 pm

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Navigational Authority on Lough Neagh

1. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether or not consideration is being

given to establishing a navigational authority on Lough Neagh. (AQO 2265/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): My Department is finalising the terms of reference for commissioning an economic appraisal to assess the viability of establishing some form of navigation authority on Lough Neagh and the rivers Blackwater and Upper Bann.

Mr I McCrea: Obviously this issue has huge potential for recreation and tourism.

What is the estimated cost of establishing a navigation authority for Lough Neagh?

Mr Poots: A feasibility study in 2004 envisaged a cost of £13.2 million for a two-stage development plan to establish a navigation authority. In addition, there would have been an annual maintenance cost of £776,000. Subsequently, a number of capital infrastructure projects or commitments, primarily sponsored by local authorities, Lough Neagh Partnership and DCAL, have significantly reduced those proposed costs. Examples of such projects include the provision of a replacement navigable bridge at Maghery Cut and improved jetty moorings at Kinnego, Ballyronan, Sandy Bay, Cranfield, Ram's Island and Antrim. Until an economic appraisal is carried out, I cannot say what the revised cost will be. However, ISNI II includes provision of £11.7 million in year 6 for this purpose.

Mr Molloy: My question has already been answered.

Mr Gardiner: Has the Minister taken any action to acquire ownership of the bed of Lough Neagh from the Shaftesbury estate, and will he consider the possibility of creating a Lough Neagh authority, charged with the development of the tourist and business potential of the lough and its surrounding region?

Mr Poots: No action has been taken to acquire the bed of Lough Neagh.

Titanic Quarter

2. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his plans for the future of the Titanic Quarter. (AQO 2295/08)

Mr Poots: The Titanic Quarter belongs to the Belfast Harbour Commissioners; any plans for the future of the area would in the first instance be a matter for them.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for his very brief answer. He is well aware of my interest in maritime heritage, which I have previously declared in this House. Will the Minister tell me, and the House, whether he is satisfied with the involvement of DCAL in the development of the Titanic signature project? Secondly, as the Minister knows, there is no Department in Northern Ireland with responsibility for

maritime heritage as such. Can he assure me that he and his colleagues will try to resolve this matter as soon as possible?

Mr Poots: The Titanic signature project is being led by DETI and is the responsibility of that Department.

I have consulted the Northern Ireland Museums Council with a view to what could potentially be achieved with regard to the maritime heritage of Northern Ireland. Maritime heritage is something that is synonymous with Northern Ireland. It stretches as far back as the plantation of Ulster — much of the purpose of which was to produce timber to make ships — and the early Presbyterians, who left from the Ulster Scots areas to travel to the United States and make that country what it has become, right through to the building of the Titanic and the role of Northern Ireland in the First and Second World Wars. There is a huge maritime history in Northern Ireland that we have failed to reflect, and that is something that I should like to see changed in the future.

Mr Newton: Does the Minister agree that the industrial heritage of Northern Ireland, including the linen, shipbuilding, rope-making and aircraft industries, and the stories of the people involved, are worth preserving? Has he any plans to create museums or display facilities in the Titanic Quarter in association with the site owners?

Mr Poots: I recently attended an exhibition on the building of the Titanic at W5, and I recommend it. It includes some excellent photographs of the people who were involved in the building of that great ship. In 2002-03, National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland commissioned a feasibility study on the development of a “museum of sea and sky” in the Titanic Quarter. Discussions have taken place with National Museums on the possibility of revisiting its proposals for the interpretation of Belfast’s maritime and industrial heritage in the context of the current plans for the regeneration of the Titanic Quarter.

Mr A Maginness: I agree with Mr Neeson that there is great value in maritime heritage; it is something that we should be very proud of.

Given the high level of public and private investment, there is a unique opportunity for the encouragement of public art in the Titanic Quarter — it would add tremendously to the overall development of that area. Does the Minister have any plans for the promotion of public art?

Mr Poots: I have held early exploratory talks about public art with people from the development sector of the business community. It has been suggested that when a significant development is undertaken, developers should contribute 1% of the cost of that development to public art in the area. I do not believe that there is a statutory means of enforcing such a scheme, but we

will discuss further the possibility of implementing it on a voluntary basis.

Community Festivals Fund

3. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the discussions he has had with local councils regarding the future delivery of the community festivals fund. (AQO 2298/08)

18. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the nature of responses his Department received from local councils in relation to the funding of festivals. (AQO 2359/08)

Mr Poots: With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall answer question 3 and question 18 together. Following my statement on 4 December 2007, departmental officials wrote to the chief executive of each local council to outline plans to transfer the administration of the community festivals fund to those councils from 1 April 2008. Since then, my officials have been working closely with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association to facilitate that transfer. The responses received to date — from a number of councils — indicate broad support for the new arrangements. Belfast City Council has sought further clarification and information on various elements of the plan.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for his response. Applications to the community festivals fund from the Orange and unionist community have been under-represented in the past. Therefore, will the Minister encourage local councils to proactively engage with individuals and groups from a unionist background to ensure greater fairness?

Mr Poots: Absolutely. In the last round of funding, approximately £450,000 was available to be distributed. Of that sum, only £40,000 was claimed by people from a unionist-identity group. That was clearly dissatisfactory. That issue must be addressed — and I trust it will be — by local authorities when they are allocating funds to the various groups this time around.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister acknowledge that not every local council, including Belfast City Council, is happy with the proposals? Will he also admit that local festivals, particularly community festivals, increasingly have to rely on private funding?

Mr Poots: The indications are that the vast majority of councils are satisfied to proceed with the proposals. Funding for local community festivals has not been reduced, so the reliance on private sources should not be any greater. Community festivals that have worked well in the past should be better able to attract private-sector funding, therefore allowing other community festivals to thrive. Indeed, the system that we have

introduced will double the amount of money allocated to the community festival fund, since it is to be match-funded by the councils.

The Member apparently claims that Belfast City Council does not support the idea because they do not want to match-fund the Government grant, but I am not sure that that is true. The new arrangement means that more money — not less — will be provided for community festivals.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister indicate how much has been spent in the last three years on the community festivals fund? What audit has been carried out on the expenditure of those funds, in respect of both value for money and measurable impact?

Mr Poots: I cannot tell the Member the spending for three years because the system has only been in operation for two. The expenditure on the community festivals fund has been £450,000 per annum for the last two years.

Mr Burns: Does the Minister agree that community festivals have been dramatically beneficial in reducing conflict and antisocial behaviour? Can he say what moneys are available from the central Government to support community festivals?

Mr Poots: I have allocated £450,000 of central Government money to local authorities for distribution to community festivals through match-funding mechanisms. In addition, groups such as the Arts Council might sponsor events that enhance the arts, and other areas that are the responsibility of other Departments might be offered funding. Nevertheless, money is clearly coming from central Government to community festivals.

Capital Stadium Development for Football Clubs

4. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the money available for capital stadium development for football clubs.

(AQO 2315/08)

16. **Mr T Burns** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the capital grants that are available for stadium development in relation to (i) rugby; (ii) gaelic games; and (iii) soccer, in this year's budget.

(AQO 2317/08)

20. **Mr D O'Loan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the grants available under capital stadium development for senior soccer clubs; and (ii) the maximum grant available.

(AQO 2315/08)

Mr Poots: With permission, Mr Speaker, I will deal with questions 4, 16 and 20 together. The recently announced capital budget for sport is £31.2 million for

2008-09, £36.4 million for 2009-2010, and £44 million for 2010-11. Sport NI is responsible for the development of sport, including the distribution of funding, and is currently considering how those funds might be allocated throughout sport. As part of that process, Sport NI is working closely with sports' governing bodies — including those from soccer, rugby and Gaelic games — on stadium-development needs. When that process is completed, Sport NI will take decisions about grants for stadium development, including maximum grants.

From its budget this year, Sport NI has introduced several capital-grant programmes — such as stadia safety, Gaelic-games modernisation and soccer-strategy programmes — that are designed to assist rugby, Gaelic games and soccer in developing their stadia.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his response. He referred to stadium safety, but there is a belief that there is a shortfall in the budget for stadium-safety work. Will the Minister outline the likely impact of health and safety rules on stadium capacity in Northern Ireland's various sports venues?

Mr Poots: When the new rules are introduced, stadia will have to close if measures are not taken to improve them. Therefore, in the coming years, without significant upgrades, certain stadia will come under a lot of pressure. Money, which will, hopefully, offset some of those pressures, will go to various sports in order to enhance the stadia that currently exist.

Mr Burns: What measures has the Minister put in place to encourage grant uptake? Does the Minister have a plan to ensure that every penny of that money is allocated to sports clubs that need it, and what will he do with any money that is not distributed this year?

Mr Poots: Sport NI is responsible for the distribution of such funding, significant funds have already been distributed, and the IFA's recent decision will ensure that that continues to be the case.

Mr Spratt: Given that the IFA has reduced its executive board from 18 to 11 members; will the remaining £4 million be allocated to it?

Mr Poots: Yes. We can now move ahead and release the soccer-strategy money. There are some minor issues, but they will be quickly resolved and, thereafter, that money will be on the ground as quickly as possible.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Is there any prospect of additional moneys being secured to allow Sport NI to open up a new round of sports capital-funding applications from community-level clubs? People in constituencies are telling us that they want to develop boxing or football clubs, but there is still a freeze on applications for sports capital grants? Has the Minister considered that matter?

Mr Poots: We recently discovered that we are able to use Exchequer funding in order to support applications

that would previously have been supported by lottery funding. In the new year, when we consider sports spending, depending on the available resources, that is something to which we will give consideration.

3.45 pm

Mr Kennedy: In light of the Minister of the Environment's stated preference for small rural communities or clachans consisting of about 14 houses, will the Minister indicate whether the provision of 2,500 houses as the price of building a stadium at the Maze is acceptable?

Mr Poots: I am not sure where Mr Kennedy is coming from.

Mr McNarry: Should he repeat the question, Mr Speaker?

Mr Poots: I do not need the question repeated. The site that was being talked about was identified as a strategic development site; not the crossroads development that Mr Kennedy may be referring to.

Ministerial Meetings with Republic of Ireland Counterpart

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the meetings he has held with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland.
(AQO 2287/08)

Mr Poots: I attended two NSMC sectoral meetings with Éamon Ó Cuiv, the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht affairs. Those were the NSMC language sectoral meeting of 26 October 2007 that was held in Altnaveigh House in Newry, and the NSMC inland waterways sectoral meeting of 17 October 2007 that was held in the Slieve Russell Hotel Golf and Country Club in Cavan.

On a visit to Dublin on 28 November 2007, I had separate meetings with Éamon Ó Cuiv, and Séamus Brennan, the Minister for Arts, Sports and Tourism, at which I was accompanied by the British Ambassador. I also met them both at the two NSMC plenary meetings, which took place on 17 July 2007 in the Armagh City Hotel and on 7 February 2008 in the Dundalk Institute of Technology.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his answer. He is obviously very busy in that regard. Given that the Minister's counterpart in the South has contributed to cultural associations in Northern Ireland, will the Minister try to close the gap in the disparity of funding for arts in Northern Ireland compared to that in the South of Ireland?

Mr Poots: The Member may not realise it, but the Budget signalled for the first time that that gap was beginning to close. Work is being done on that issue.

The gap on spending on the arts in Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the UK is also beginning to close as a consequence of the Budget.

Lord Browne: During the meeting with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, did the Minister express the deep anger that is felt by the majority of Northern Ireland soccer fans regarding the Football Association of Ireland's claim on players who were born in this part of the United Kingdom?

Mr Poots: That particular issue was not being driven by the Minister for Arts, Sports and Tourism; it was the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dermot Ahern, who had been pushing it.

Football bodies have made it clear that they do not want political interference in football, which is the appropriate line to take. I urge my counterparts in the Irish Republic, or elsewhere, to allow the football authorities to devise their own strategies on that issue.

The current rules are clear: a person can play only for the country that they, their parents or their grandparents were born in. Therefore, a person who was born in Northern Ireland and whose parents and grandparents were born in Northern Ireland should be playing football for Northern Ireland and no other country.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs M Bradley: Has the Minister raised the possibility of additional funding from the Irish Exchequer for joint centres of excellence for the Olympic Games, or for any other sports facilities or services that can be shared on a cross-border basis? That includes the judo centre of excellence and the Derry City Football Club centre of excellence.

Mr Poots: I am well aware that the Member's colleague Mr Ramsey has paid at least one visit to Dublin to discuss the future of a new stadium at the Brandywell. I have discussed that issue with Séamus Brennan.

If the Government of the Republic of Ireland want to contribute to a club that plays in the Football Association of Ireland's league, that is a matter for them.

Mr Brolly: Ceist uimhir a sé.

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister.

Mr Poots: I was waiting for the English translation.

Mr Brolly: Question No 6.

Employment Opportunities for Local Actors

6. **Mr Brolly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his Department's plans to provide full-time employment opportunities for local actors.
(AQO 2344/08)

Mr Poots: DCAL does not have a direct role in providing employment for actors, but support is provided through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Screen. Local actors may apply to the Arts Council for support for individual artist programmes. The council offers grants of up to £5,000 for project assistance, travel grants and residencies, and so on. The Arts Council also supports local theatre companies and venues through revenue and project grants and has made drama an art-form priority in its current strategic plan.

Northern Ireland Screen encourages the use of local actors in the productions that it supports. Recent films such as ‘Closing the Ring’ and ‘Middletown’ and Irish-language drama ‘Seacht’ all had a large cast of local actors. The Department for Employment and Learning has advised that it does not tailor its programmes and services to any particular sector, such as the acting profession. Its services are used by a wide range of jobseekers and employers alike. Those services include a job centre and an online facility through which employers advertise their vacancies and jobseekers identify potential job opportunities.

Mr Brolly: In view of the fact that actors, like boxers, tend to come up through the amateur ranks, is the Minister disappointed that the Arts Council has told us that it does not have a full and exhaustive list of amateur drama groups?

Mr Poots: Some would say that there is a fair bit of support going to actors already — there are 108 MLAs here, and a few of them would perhaps fall into that category. Perhaps I hear some of them trying to get in on the act here right now.

The numbers involved in amateur dramatics are such that it would be exceedingly difficult for the Arts Council to garner them all together.

Mr Hamilton: Does the Minister share my view that an insufficient amount of locally produced drama is being broadcast on the BBC and other channels? What is being done to increase the amount of such drama from Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: It has been somewhat disappointing that, in spite of the fact that we have made great progress in the film industry, the BBC and ITV have not made the same investment. In fact, part of the BBC charter would indicate that a greater investment should be made in the regions. People perceive that dramas such as ‘Murphy’s Law’ are made in Belfast, yet the only thing that relates to Northern Ireland in ‘Murphy’s Law’ is Jimmy Nesbitt. Clearly the BBC has a role to play; we have raised the issue of the resources that should be put into the industry in Northern Ireland with the BBC at a local level, and we will also raise it at a national level with its director general Mark Thompson.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Minister for his answers. In 2006, cultural tourism contributed £324 million to Belfast’s economy, an increase of 14% on the previous year. That supports nearly 16,000 full-time jobs and has triggered over £300 million of investment with additional hotels, restaurants and venues. Scotland also sees that the arts are big business. Does the Minister appreciate that connection, and does he understand that one has to invest to accumulate? What portion of the Minister’s budget is spent on drama and art in schools?

Mr Poots: The Member raises an interesting point about how the arts help the economy, and, in particular, the economy of our capital city. He raised this matter at a very relevant time — one would nearly think I had primed this question because the Department has set aside a considerable amount of money for the development of the metropolitan arts centre. The centre will cost about £17 million, and just under £3 million has currently been raised. A request has been placed with Belfast City Council for support for that venue. Given the figures that Dr Coulter has outlined, I would like to believe that a very large cheque from Belfast City Council will be coming our way to ensure that work on that venue proceeds.

Mr Speaker: Mr Burnside, who is next on the list to ask a question, is not in the Chamber. Questions No 8, 9 and 10 have been withdrawn. Mr Ford does not wish to publish question 11.

Eel Fishing in Lough Neagh

12. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm whether he will meet directly with the Lough Neagh Fishermen’s Co-operative in order to discuss the needs of the eel-fishing industry.
(AQO 2339/08)

Mr Poots: I shall visit the Lough Neagh Fishermen’s Co-operative in the near future to discuss the eel-fishing industry’s needs.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Given the shortage of elvers in Lough Neagh, is the Minister concerned for the eel-fishing industry?

Mr Poots: The co-operative buys a considerable number of elvers each year for Lough Neagh, and its members are pressing the Department for greater financial support towards the cost. Later this year, I shall meet co-operative members to discuss the matter further. I shall investigate whether there is a way in which to assist the co-operative, and I want to see what its members do for themselves. I shall assess whether those who benefit from eel fishing in Lough Neagh are reinvesting sufficient resources.

Mr Speaker: Mr Simpson and Mr O’Dowd are not in the Chamber, so we move on to question 15.

Northern Ireland Football

15. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what consideration he has given to marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Northern Ireland World Cup football team; and to recognising the heroic actions of Mr Harry Gregg during the Munich disaster.

(AQO 2281/08)

Mr Poots: As all Members know, Harry Gregg is a former member of the Northern Ireland football team, and, during an outstanding career, he played in goal for Manchester United from 1957 to 1967. Harry pulled some of his Manchester United teammates, including Bobby Charlton, Jackie Blanchflower and Dennis Viollet, from a burning plane during the Munich air disaster in 1958. Harry received the MBE in 1995, and I am sure that the Assembly will join me in praising his heroic actions and in recognising his outstanding contribution to football and to Northern Ireland.

I intend to host a reception for the surviving members of the 1958 Northern Ireland World Cup football team, including Harry Gregg, as soon as that can be arranged. Officials in my Department are making the necessary arrangements.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his warm and positive reply, which demonstrates that the Assembly is responsive to public opinion. I also congratulate the Minister on reaching question 15, which is probably a record for the Chamber. I just happened to be present for my question.

Mr Weir: It does not look as though the Minister will get to question 16. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Shannon: He definitely will not. Does the Minister agree that the 1958 World Cup team marked the start of a positive era for Northern Ireland football? To invite the team, including Billy Bingham, to the Assembly would make for a special event.

It is often said that the term “hero” is overused, but Harry Gregg is a hero to many people in Northern Ireland. He saved many lives on that afternoon in Munich, and it would be good not only to recognise his heroism but to present him with a gift, if that were in order.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. The 1958 football team made a significant contribution to Northern Ireland. It also paved the way for the success of the Northern Ireland teams that reached the World Cup finals of 1982 and 1986. I want to pay tribute to the 1958 team while its players are still around — I understand that seven or eight of the team are still alive. I want to arrange a significant event to recognise them and their heroics during that World Cup, and to pay particular tribute to Harry Gregg, who demonstrated extreme bravery during the Munich air disaster and great humility in its aftermath.

Mr Speaker: Neither Trevor Lunn nor Pat Ramsey is in the Chamber, so that ends questions to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Mrs D Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The first questions today were to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews legislation, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is a joint office. Will you clarify that that is the case? Further to that, will you examine the answers to the questions on the date for the devolution of policing and justice and on the definition of victims? Did the answers given reflect the view of both the First Minister and the deputy First Minister?

Mr Speaker: I take the Member’s point, but that is not a matter for the Speaker. Everyone in the House should know that OFMDFM is a joint office. That is all that I can say to the Member. The Speaker is certainly not responsible for anything beyond that.

4.00 pm

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Rates (Industrial Hereditaments) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves the Rates (Industrial Hereditaments) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008.

Dr Farry: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to conclude my remarks. I will avoid the temptation to repeat my earlier comments for the benefit of those who missed them.

As I was stressing, the key issue with regard to business taxation must be the pursuit of a differential rate of corporation tax. I am disappointed that the Executive seem to have given up the fight and that the Assembly has not received a statement from the Minister or any of his colleagues that sets out the Executive's response to the Varney Review and how matters are to be taken forward. A lot may be happening behind the scenes. However, it is important that the Assembly have the opportunity to question Ministers and to pass judgement on those issues. It is also important that the Assembly consider how industrial derating will play a role in the future regional economic strategy and what effect it will have on the Varney Review II, which is well under way.

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

I have reflected long and hard on the position that I have articulated with respect to industrial derating. I appreciate that there have been quite a few Assembly debates on the issue. I have paid particular attention to the ERINI report. It is a substantive piece of work to which the Assembly must give proper consideration and due regard. Any journey that the Alliance Party may have made on the issue pales into insignificance compared with the journeys that several parties have made in recent years. The Alliance Party accepts ERINI's recommendation to set industrial rating at 50% rather than the 30% that is proposed by this statutory rule. I will conclude by putting on the record some comments from the ERINI report:

"Industrial derating is important because rates are now a full part of the resources available to the Executive. Derating, therefore, has a genuine opportunity cost in terms of public services foregone ... There is little evidence that rates would cause a collapse in manufacturing with substantial loss of output and jobs beyond existing trends in the sector. Nor is there much of an argument to support returning derating as a means of attracting new investment ... Based on the analysis undertaken by ERINI the Executive has a range of choices over the degree of further implementation it undertakes. Given the quality of information available to analyse

this issue ERINI suggest proceeding cautiously. At 50% implementation no more than an estimated 10% of companies are likely to face rate bills much more than 15% of their profits. Proceeding to this point would incur a relatively small risk to industry as a whole ... Proceeding no further than this degree of implementation is the position we favour."

The Alliance Party concurs with ERINI that setting industrial rating at 50% is the cautious approach to take. Although Members may believe that moving it from 30% to 50% is risky, I caution them that the Assembly faces the biggest risk of all if it does not seek to modernise and rebalance the economy.

Mr B McCrea: The Member has talked extensively about ERINI's analysis. How does he feel about the DTZ Pida report that has informed previous Assembly debates? It says that the imposition of industrial rates would have a negligible effect. At the time, did he believe that report to be flawed? There seems to be some contradiction.

Has he also considered 'The Future of Manufacturing in Northern Ireland', prepared for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment by PricewaterhouseCoopers, which forecasts 40,000 job losses if there is no investment in the manufacturing sector? Has he considered any research over and above that single ERINI report?

Dr Farry: The reports to which the Member refers deal with manufacturing in general, rather than the specific issue of industrial derating. It is important that the Assembly avoid mixing analyses in its discussion. Clearly, there is a problem in manufacturing.

However, there is also a need to invest across the economy. It is more efficient and effective to invest the revenue that would be gained from moving to 50% rating in the drivers of our economy, which would provide benefit across the spectrum — the service sector, the manufacturing sector and all other sectors. That would be a better way to improve our productivity and economy, maintain full employment and become a prosperous and sustainable region within the United Kingdom.

Mr Newton: I support the Minister in his endeavours. Although the Order is rather short and is being introduced in a relatively low-key manner, it is vitally important to the well-being of the various sectors of our industry.

Unlike Dr Farry, I have spent my life either working in industry; working in an advisory capacity to industry, or working as a consultant — particularly to the manufacturing industry. The Order is particularly vital to the well-being of the manufacturing sector, the 90,000 employees in that sector — which was the figure the last time I checked — and the prosperity of that sector and the Northern Ireland economy.

Members are aware of the high-profile campaign that was mounted by the Northern Ireland Manufacturing

Focus Group (NIMFG), which comprises people who do not come together unless they feel that their backs are against the wall. In his remarks, the Minister quoted how industrialists would feel if there were 100% rates. It was stated that the result would be the potential for reduced investment in plants, job losses, and that, if there were 100% rates, moving across the border would be a more attractive option.

My experience of industrialists is that they are men and women who say what they mean and mean what they say. When they come together to speak with one voice in a campaign, they must be listened to because they mean what they say. They do not embark on such campaigns lightly — they embark on them because they believe in the position that they have taken. The NIMFG campaign involved employees from the smallest to the largest employers in Northern Ireland and were from across the manufacturing industry.

It has already been stated that the removal of industrial rating dates back to 1929. It was a helpful tool for the various Ministers of the economy in Northern Ireland when they were embarking on trips to attract industry to Northern Ireland. There were precious few tools in their toolbox to help attract industrialists to Northern Ireland.

It certainly was of help and value in the development of indigenous manufacturing organisations. Businesses find starting up difficult, and the incentive of having no rates to pay is invaluable.

In April 2003, direct rule Ministers announced the phasing out that benefit. That announcement was met with absolute horror by the manufacturing sector, which would have been due to start paying those full rates by April 2001 had there not been a devolved Assembly.

Members have already said that the manufacturing sector is under pressure in various areas — it is contending with increasing energy costs, additional costs in the transport of goods, and it daily faces minimum-wage levels from manufacturers in the Far East. Dr Farry referred to the textiles sector. There are probably fewer than 5,000 people working in that sector today, as opposed to around 25,000 people five or six years ago. Industrial derating was not the only contributing factor, but it was a factor, and continues to be.

I welcome the fact that the Minister has said that he will hold the industrial rating level at 30%. When this issue was debated in the House, the Gallery was almost full of people with a vested interest in the matter, who wanted to hear the Assembly's views. The decision to hold the rate at 30% will allow industrialists to set their budgets, and to plan and determine their investments until 2011. There are few ways in which we can directly support the sector, but that is one way.

The Rates (Industrial Hereditaments) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 supports the Assembly's Programme for Government, which identifies economic growth as a priority. It sends out the clear message that we value those who are prepared to get their hands dirty, work and invest in the manufacturing sector, and those who are prepared to risk investing their money and employing staff.

The Order also sends out a message to those who are employed in the manufacturing sector that the Assembly is prepared to do what it can to ensure that the maintenance of the declining numbers will be arrested, and that there may be some growth.

Dr Farry's attitude reminds me of the story of the parents who went to watch their son as he marched in a parade, and noticed that everyone was out of step except their little boy. A different system may be developed, and certainly could be developed, to support industry. However, we are where we are. Employers said that there was the potential to lose industrial jobs if we did not arrest the rate at 30%. In the longer term, we may be able to arrive at a different system, but the matter needed to be addressed in a practical manner.

The naysayers of the Assembly, and those who argue that they would prefer direct rule to continue rather than to have the Assembly in its present format, need to talk to the manufacturing sector and the business community about such matters.

The business sector and those who are employed therein have a great appreciation of that particular matter as well as of other activities.

4.15 pm

Mr B McCrea: At the outset, I wish to declare an interest. I have previously informed the House of my association with the Northern Ireland Manufacturing Group. That has been noted in the Register of Members' Interests, although I am no longer connected to the group.

I was not going to speak on this topic because:

"Success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan".

However, rarely have I heard such hypocrisy and cant from those in the Benches to my right. That is opposition for opposition's sake. It is based on spurious arguments, weak analyses and poor research.

"Cant" is the operative word, because that is all I can hear — "You can't do this, that, or the other." Time and again we are lectured and told that it is time for the Assembly to start to deal with the things over which it has control. Dealing with industrial rating is a significant step forward.

As Members will know, I have been involved with that issue for a considerable time. I have tried to explain it to all concerned, but it appears that I have failed to explain it to Dr Farry. I stand to be corrected,

but I note that he did not attend any of the council briefings; he did not join us at the Waterfront Hall; and he did not visit any firms' premises to find out anything about the situation. I have some nice photographs of a Northern Ireland Manufacturing Group event at the Waterfront Hall that Mr Hamilton will recognise, because he was there.

Mr S Wilson: We were there too.

Mr B McCrea: Yes. A few Strangford Members were there, but not Mr McCarthy. Perhaps he knows a lot about the value of property and does not need to go to such events — at least, not to events about office space.

Mr Neeson stood up in front of nearly 2,000 people at the Waterfront Hall and said:

“We are calling for industrial rates payments to be capped at 25%, where they are now, so that we can be clear about precisely what effect they have on investment and start-ups.”

The Alliance Party has clearly undertaken some sort of voyage of exploration.

Let me make the case simple. We live and work in a global environment. Every year manufacturing costs increase, whether for transport, engineering or labour. However, our ability to pass on costs is negligible, because we operate in a global market. The only way in which we can compete is through constant innovation and investment. That is the real problem. Dr Farry talks about rates affecting only 15% of profits. However, that 15% is used to make investment. Without investment, firms have no long-term future.

Some Members have suggested — although I have not risen to the bait before — that industrial derating is a blunt instrument. Whether that is the case, the analysis of the figures shows that 80% of the industrial rates are paid by 20% of the companies. Our biggest and best companies, which employ the most people, are carrying the burden. It is not difficult to imagine that the intervention will be effective.

It may be the case, as other Members have suggested, that we will find another way round the problem. I was particularly pleased to hear the Minister of Finance and Personnel say — if I heard him correctly — that we will examine what will happen in 2011. At this stage, all that we can do is change the phasing in. If we do nothing, the figure will go straight to 100% in 2011. Perhaps the Minister will clarify that at some stage.

Make no mistake: if we put up rates, we will lose manufacturing companies and jobs.

Mr Farry talked about sunset industries, and how we should take money away from this sector and put it somewhere else. Let us consider Northern Ireland plc: where is there growth at the moment? Transport and transportation equipment is one of our big growth sectors, dominated by two companies: Wrightbus and Bombardier. The next is rubber and chemicals, and I

know that Mr Newton is well involved in those sorts of things. The firm that leads is Dupont. When we come to that exciting, big-profit earner for Northern Ireland, non-ferrous mineral products, that turns out to be the manufacture of concrete blocks. What do all of those companies have in common? They need space — and that, Mr Farry, is the big difference between manufacturers and retailers. Manufacturers need a lot of space because they employ many people; however, they have the freedom to move. If they move, we lose not only the rates, but the national insurance, tax and VAT. We cannot afford to let our big companies leave.

There is another reason that Northern Ireland must maintain this intervention. We have a porous land border with one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. No other part of the world faces such an economic challenge. Furthermore, there is a stretch of water that is very expensive to cross between us and our primary market, Great Britain. Those factors have to be overcome. Manufacturing needs this intervention. Otherwise, if I heard him correctly, Mr Farry is telling the 90,000 people who work in manufacturing that: their jobs are not valuable, that we do not want manufacturing and that we want something else. Did you ever hear the like of it?

Mr Farry took some exception to the analysis of gross value added (GVA). The GVA estimate for Northern Ireland is roughly £22,000 million. That represents a GVA per capita of £12,971, which is 81% of the UK average. In Northern Ireland, manufacturing accounts for 16% of that GVA: that is higher than the UK average which is 14%, and it is certainly much higher than the proportion accounted for by farming and agriculture, which is only 1%. Manufacturers, particularly big manufacturers, drive most of our private sector.

The average figure of GVA per head in the region for Northern Ireland is £14,000: in manufacturing, however, the average GVA is £49,000. The problem for our economy is that we shed highly-paid workers, who deliver high value-added to the economy, and replace them with part-time workers in leisure, hospitality and retail — a sector in which GVA is only £8,000 per annum on average.

For that reason our productivity is falling. There is nothing more important than raising productivity. We are fully employed, but we get less for it. The only way to deal with that — though, perhaps Mr Farry or someone else has a better idea — is by investment. That is what a tax on industrial derating is: it is a tax on investment.

Mr Farry questioned the Minister of Finance and Personnel about being selective in the way that he read the report from ERINI. The Minister can comment on that; however, other reports were not commented on,

which indicates the weakness of Mr Farry's research and the flaws in his arguments. The report by DTZ Piedad Consulting suggested that:

"while there would be specific cases where the removal of industrial de-rating would lead to adverse effects, the overall effect on the level of economic activity in the medium term would be negligible."

That report suggested that, even if 100% of rates were applied, the cost would amount to only 2.7% of profits, not the 15% that Mr Farry talked about. That showed, once and for all, that the DTZ report was complete and utter drivel.

What about the previous ERINI report, that of 2005, 'Measurement and Benchmarking of Competitiveness — The Cost of Doing business in Northern Ireland'? That concluded that Northern Ireland was a pretty good place to do business. It said that there are more expensive energy, transport and environmental costs, but labour and property are cheap.

Dr Farry has taken that headline figure. The problem is that the next page of the report says that that does not apply to manufacturing. Cheaper labour for manufacturing is available in the Republic of Ireland, but when the report refers to savings in property, it means office not manufacturing space. In fact, six regions of the United Kingdom have cheaper manufacturing space than this place. By 2009, the Republic of Ireland will be uncompetitive to us. More attention to detail might help.

A report entitled 'The Future of Manufacturing in Northern Ireland' was prepared for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment by PricewaterhouseCoopers. It forecasts 40,000 job losses if we do not get investment. More research can be added to that. What did Moy Park Ltd, Wrightbus Ltd, the CBI and the Ulster Farmers' Union say to the Programme for Government? They all said repeatedly that an end to industrial derating is not the right way to go. The Alliance Party's position is spurious nonsense and an attempt to gain short-term party political advantage. It is a disgrace.

There have been differences of opinion on whether we have won this battle. Some Members present supported the meeting at the Waterfront Hall, which was a great day. We spoke to Mr Hain, who told us that we were wasting our time.

Mr S Wilson: That was not a great day.

Mr B McCrea: That was not a great day, as Mr Wilson knows.

The Northern Ireland Manufacturing Focus Group received a letter saying that the Government had heard what we had to say but that the answer was no. We had to call upon some friends. I pay tribute to those from the union Amicus who sorted out a meeting with Mr Hain in Westminster. It was slightly unfortunate that

that meeting was scheduled for 12 July, but we attended on that date. Forty-eight hours later, a change of policy was made. On 30 January 2007, David Hanson said:

"I announced on 23 November 2006 that the level of rate liability for manufacturers in 2007/2008 would be 30% rather than 35%. I can now confirm that the legislation to bring this into operation from 1 April 2007 has been laid at Westminster."

Does Dr Farry not understand that there were arguments to be put? The Government did not agree to a freeze simply because we asked them; we had to fight not only the Ministers, but the Treasury. We had to fight people who told us that there was no chance of making any progress on the issue, that the Assembly had considered it not once but twice and that there were reports from ERINI, DTZ Piedad and elsewhere. Those reports are from people who know the price of everything and the value of nothing. In my intervention I challenged Dr Farry to say whether anyone in the Alliance Party had any idea of what it is like to run a business in a competitive world. Businesses need our help, not our platitudes and admonishments.

Manufacturing is based in our rural areas. Few Members have not seen manufacturing plants close and move across the border or elsewhere. Once they are gone, they are gone. People in Strabane know what happened when Adria went, with the building of houses. The big companies will call in the professionals. The biggest argument that we made to direct rule Ministers was that increasing industrial rating will not increase the rates tax, because businesses will find ways of dealing with it. They will either downsize or bring their sites together. Moy Park, for example, went to a single site; eventually, those single sites will move to Normandy or somewhere else. The ending of industrial derating is a flawed policy. There must be derating, and I accept the argument that in an imperfect world one must use whatever tools are available. This tool is available, and it is right that we should use it. If it had been up to me, I would have capped industrial rates at a lower value than 30%. A line can be drawn in the sand, and I hope that all Members will not only keep it at 30% for the lifetime of this Assembly, but in future Assemblies.

If the Alliance Party wants to consider opposition, its members should read some reports on the issue.

4.30 pm

Mr S Wilson: I almost feel sorry for Dr Farry — the emphasis being on the word "almost" — as he has rightly been the butt of attacks from all sides of the House, during this and previous debates on the matter. Those of us who have listened to the hard-pressed taxpayers and industrialists in Northern Ireland know that the Finance Minister's decisions were made in response to genuine calls from people who say that they do not want to have more taxes heaped on them

and that we must find a way of ensuring competitiveness for industry. However, Dr Farry has ensured that the Alliance Party will be for ever known as the fiscal Fagans of the Assembly. It picks people's pockets at every opportunity, and if it can get its hand in as well, it will do so — as deeply as possible. In fact, it might also try to get its arm in.

I also feel sorry for Dr Farry because I suspect that he thought that he was not alone in opposing the Order. Indeed, he has been led up the garden path by the SDLP. During the Committee meetings on the matter, the SDLP gave the impression that it would back the Alliance Party in opposing the Finance Minister's measure. However, I suspect that some time between that meeting when the vote was taken and this morning, Mr O'Loan had an opportunity to read the Official Report of 12 June 2007. When he realised what he and his colleague for Newry and Armagh Dominic Bradley said, he began to realise —

Mr O'Loan: I hope that the Member listened to me earlier when I repeated what I said at the Committee meeting in question: my only concern about the matter was the fact that the Assembly and the Departments have still not addressed the important issue that was highlighted in the ERINI report and that the Committee presented in its report to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, which is that we need to work out a new relationship between the manufacturing sector and the Assembly and its Departments. I made that point only, and I made it clearly today. If the Member thinks about that, he might realise that he is ploughing a furrow that does not need to be ploughed and that will not yield any grain — to refer to the next debate.

Mr S Wilson: I suspect that Mr O'Loan may have to retract what he has said if I plough that furrow a little deeper. From what I gather — and he can correct me if I am wrong — he did not merely express concern about the Order at the Committee meeting, but he voted to reject it. If he wishes to correct me, I am happy to be corrected. On that basis alone, the poor unsuspecting members of the Alliance Party thought that they had an ally. At least we will not take all the —

Dr Farry: I assure the Member that the comments that members of the Alliance Party make are, indeed, the thoughts of the Alliance Party. We are happy to be here as sole voices of sanity in the midst of all the chaos on the issue. If people wish to support us, that is fine; if they do not, that is also fine. My position is not influenced one bit by whether other parties wish to support us today. However, I am confident that there are people in society, including those in the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland, which produced the report, who will concur with our remarks.

Mr S Wilson: I thank the Member for that intervention. I am glad that at least Mr O'Loan was given an

opportunity to eat his words before he eats his dinner. He should have availed himself of that opportunity.

Not only does the Alliance Party have fiscal Fagans in its membership, it has fiscal Fagans who suffer from schizophrenia. Alliance Party Members have spoken on industrial rates twice in the Chamber: once during the Hain Assembly in 2006; and on 12 June 2007. I suppose a person is allowed to change his or her mind between 2006 and 2008, but to change it between 12 June 2007 and now is pushing it a wee bit.

I will remind Members of the Alliance Party's position on industrial rating. In June 2007, the Ulster Unionist Party moved a motion calling for the Finance Minister to implement the recommendation that rates be frozen at 25%. The DUP tabled an amendment to the motion and proposed that the Assembly call

“upon the Executive to consider the resolution made by the ‘Hain’ Assembly on 6 June 2006, concerning industrial rates, in light of the impact of rating on manufacturing in Northern Ireland and in the context of other priorities in the Comprehensive Spending Review, having considered the independent assessment presently being carried out into the matter by the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland (ERINI).” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p442, col 2*].

The Alliance Party to a man — and a woman — voted in favour of that amendment. Dr Farry said that:

“The Alliance Party leans towards supporting the DUP amendment”. — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p449, col 1*].

He continued:

“I understand why the manufacturing sector wants to retain industrial derating, and in the absence of any other mechanism, that retention is particularly important. In the absence of any wider package, it is important that the Assembly lobbies for some form of industrial derating to address the problems that the manufacturing sector is encountering.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p449, col 2*].

He also said that:

“the proposal is worthy of consideration, but it needs to be addressed within the comprehensive spending review as part of an overall package.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p449, col 2*].

He finished by saying that:

“It is important that we do not let the issue of industrial derating fall off the table.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p450, col 1*].

He made that stirring remark to the cheers of the Galleries and, no doubt, to manufacturers all over Northern Ireland. They had a champion who would not let the issue of industrial derating fall off the table.

Dr Farry: The ERINI report states that it is safe to move from 30% industrial rating to 50% — a move that I would support. There would still be considerable industrial derating, and it would be better to use the resources that the Executive would receive to invest across the whole economy. I do not see an inconsistency in our approach; it is an evolution based on the facts in the ERINI report, the comprehensive spending review and the Budget.

Mr S Wilson: That would have provided at least a semi-plausible explanation for the Alliance Party's turnaround, had it been the only condition set by the Member on 12 June; however, he laid down other conditions relating to the comprehensive spending review, for instance. The comprehensive spending review has taken place, and Members know what the situation will be. The Minister of Finance and Personnel has made his decisions on the basis of that comprehensive spending review and the availability of resources.

Dr Farry also said that industrial derating should be retained only in the absence of an alternative package. Therefore he said that industrial derating should be looked at in the context of the comprehensive spending review, which we have had; in the context of other packages, which are not in place; and in the context of the ERINI report.

I do not claim to be on top of such issues, but, as the Member for Lagan Valley said — and he knows more about such things — other reports have rubbished that idea. However, even if that were to be the case, and whether one considers the ERINI report or the Minister's announcement, the principle has been established that some form of industrial rates relief is important in order to protect profits and investments and to make industry competitive.

If we are now quibbling about 30% or 50% industrial rates relief, that is not the Member for North Down's argument. Although I do not have shorthand, I have noted it down. He said that the arguments are weak: if we were starting with a clean sheet of paper, we would not do that, and, in any case, transportation, energy and labour costs are more important. He said that that was not very important — but it was important in June 2007. It was so important that, in the absence of a package and in the context of the comprehensive spending review — which we now have — it was insisted that we should not let it fall off the table. However, not only has it now been knocked off the table but it has been put into the dustbin.

The only conclusion that I can come to is that the Alliance Party — in its important role as the Assembly's official opposition — does not care what proposal comes from the Minister, how well thought out or argued it is, or even what its members have said about the subject in the past; its members must vote against it. Although the point has already been made, that is not what opposition is about.

I am not worried about the Alliance Party, but it does no credit to a party simply to oppose, because, when a situation arises in which real opposition might be important, opposition from such a party will lack credibility.

Let us consider some of the Member's other arguments. He said that more emphasis should be placed on

a change to the economy's balance, which is exactly what the Minister of Finance and Personnel was attempting to achieve in his Budget — a change in the economy's balance from a public-sector-dominated economy to one with a greater emphasis on the private sector.

If we assume that that is the shift of balance that the Alliance Party wants, what did Dr Farry suggest? He wants to make it more difficult for the private sector to earn profits and to invest. Between now and 2012, his suggestions would mean that £144 million — and £50 million a year after that — would be taken from the private sector, which is some way to change the balance. Dr Farry said that he is a doctor of political philosophy; however, if he thinks that that is a good way to change the balance of Northern Ireland's economy, economics cannot have featured much on his course. He wants to move the balance towards the private sector, but he gives that sector's costs and profits a good kicking.

We have had this debate two or three times before in the Assembly, and, as one would expect under devolution, the Minister has responded to the concerns raised — in this instance, by the manufacturing industry — by arguing why the previous Secretary of State was taking us in the wrong direction.

Rather than simply voting against the motion to show that it is the opposition party, perhaps it would be better if the Alliance Party had second thoughts, just like the SDLP has had over the last week. Instead of eating their words, its members could back up their previous words with action and vote for the motion.

4.45 pm

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): I thank all the Members who have contributed to the debate. Collectively, we have considerably outperformed the expectations of the Business Committee, which allocated 15 minutes for the debate. It should have been finished before lunch, but we are still at it — although I will not delay the House too long now.

The Order is short, but, nevertheless, it represents a significant move for the manufacturing sector, which has experienced a steady loss of employment as well as a continuous decline in output. Everyone is aware of the all-too-familiar announcements in recent years of redundancies and closures that have been brought about by external factors, particularly competition from the lower-cost economies in the Far East. I trust that the pegging of the rates burden at 30% will encourage companies to compete more effectively and to diversify and prosper. In meetings that I have had with people in the manufacturing sector, I have been encouraged to hear that that decision has provided them with the motivation that they need to proceed with plans for expansion.

Most of the points that were raised today are not new to us; we have heard them in other debates. However, if Members felt that they were worth repeating, then I am quite happy to repeat the responses to them. I thank the Deputy Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee, and I very much welcome the Committee's support. Mr Beggs also expressed his support as a Committee member.

Declan O'Loan confined his disquiet to one element of the ERINI report, though quite what element of the report required him to vote against this piece of legislation is not clear. His voting in Committee should have been on the issue that was being discussed by the Committee — this piece of legislation, not the ERINI report. I trust that his more measured tones today were a sign that the SDLP will support the legislation.

However, I will touch on an issue that he raised both in Committee and in the House: a concordat between Government and industry. I said during the Budget debate on 12 February that the communication channels between the wider industry and Government were in place. We are already creating a much better atmosphere and relationship with the business sector. Of course, in the first instance, that matter would be one for my colleague Nigel Dodds, the ETI Minister, to consider. However, I will do everything that I can to contribute towards that goal.

Mr Basil McCrea asked if he had heard me right when I remarked on what would happen after the CSR period. I put it on record that the current primary legislation permits changes to be made to the percentage liability only until the year ending March 2011. After that date, rates will revert to 100% liability. That is why I said that I would be seeking to amend the primary legislation as soon as practicable; that will allow us to ensure that we do not move to 100% liability. If the Member looks again at my speech, he will see what my mind is as regards the outcome, although I suspect that the legislation itself would allow the decisions to be taken by some subordinate legislation.

The Member for North Down Dr Farry raised a number of issues and also asked some questions. If liability were kept at 30% instead of being increased to 50%, the estimated revenue loss for the year would be approximately £7 million from the regional rate. Therefore, the Member should include in his calculations whether the risk to the manufacturing sector is worth £7 million. Most people will conclude that the income is too small for such a risk to be taken.

Perhaps I should not be hurt by Dr Farry's remarks. To a large extent, his criticisms are synthetic. I am convinced that, had I proposed an industrial rate level of 50%, he would have proposed an amendment to reduce it to 30% or perhaps even to 25%.

Alliance Party members are on record on the issue, and the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Basil McCrea quoted their position on other public issues. My colleague the Member for East Antrim Sammy Wilson indicated what Members from that party said during a debate in 2007.

However, the House was unanimous on the issue of industrial rating on 6 June 2006. During that debate, Mr Sean Neeson expressed the views of the Alliance Party in no uncertain terms. I note that he is not present this afternoon. I am sure that there is no connection between his absence and his disquiet at the Alliance Party's position. During that debate, he stated:

"We cannot underestimate the importance of the surviving manufacturing base in Northern Ireland. However, as I have said in previous debates, we face many challenges, particularly from the global economy. We have seen the damage that has been done to the textile sector, which has almost disappeared. The discussions that we have had with NIMFG have shown that jobs are at risk in Northern Ireland. It is not, as other Members stated, a 'Wolf, wolf!' situation." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 19, p64, col 1*].

Therefore, he was contending for the manufacturing industry back in 2006. Mr Neeson went on to say:

"The parties represented in the Chamber are agreed on the issue and have met the Secretary of State. He put the ball in our court and said that if we want to deal with the issue — he does not have a problem with us doing that". — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 19, p64, col 1*].

Today's proposal is to keep the industrial rate at 30%. As that quotation shows, the Alliance Party supported keeping industrial rating at 25%, and its Members suggested that devolution would enable us to do so. Now that we have devolution and can deal with that issue ourselves, they want the rate doubled to 50%.

In the earlier debate, Dr Farry lectured us on what he described as selective quotations — I think that that was the term that he used. When he intervened during Mr Sammy Wilson's contribution, he said that the ERINI report said that it was safe to move to 50%. The ERINI report does not say that. To put words into the mouths of the ERINI reporting team is worse than selective reporting.

The report indicated that there was a relatively small risk. Therefore, it was Dr Farry who mischievously used selective quotations. I will read the quotation to Members, who can check it when they get their copy of Hansard tomorrow. When quoting from the ERINI report, he said:

"At 50% implementation no more than an estimated 10% of companies are likely to face rate bills much more than 15% of their profits. Proceeding to this point would incur a relatively small risk to industry as a whole".

He then jumped, not telling anybody that he had done so, to say:

"Proceeding no further than this degree of implementation is the position we favour."

The bit of the ERINI report that he left out because it did not suit his case, was:

“though the decline of marginal sectors such as Textiles would be accelerated.”

He deliberately left that section out. I will now read the whole sentence from the ERINI report:

“Proceeding to this point would incur a relatively small risk to industry as a whole, though the decline of marginal sectors such as Textiles would be accelerated.”

It does not say “safe”; it says “a relatively small risk”.

Dr Farry might like to go to Portadown and tell Ulster Carpets that they can have that increase, even though it will accelerate their decline. He might like to go to Banbridge, and tell it to Ulster Weavers, or to his own constituency in North Down and tell it to Regency Carpets, or to some of the other small manufacturing concerns in the textile sector whose demise he is going to accelerate.

It is abundantly clear that there is selective quotation of the ERINI report from the Alliance Party on this issue. Alliance Party members are trying to disguise the fact that the ERINI report did not say that it was safe, but that there was a relatively small risk. As a Government who put economic growth in Northern Ireland as their number one priority, we are not prepared to take a relatively small risk with people’s jobs.

When the manufacturers themselves were faced with the question of what they would do if rates were increased as proposed, their answers were clear: in some cases they would move outside Northern Ireland; some would not expand their businesses; some would lay off employees; and in some cases employees would not get any further wage increases. That was the prospect that we faced. That is why, in the ERINI report, the recommendation was not simply to increase to 50%. The Member needs to look at that report more closely, as it says:

“In our view this points to the movement towards a maximum 50%”.

I repeat: “the movement towards”. But, of course, Alliance Party members are way out ahead — they want it at 50% straight away; they want it upfront; they want it doubled from the 25% that they were asking for and that they agreed with everybody just a few years ago.

Alliance Party members are going to have a difficult task explaining to manufacturing companies in each of their constituencies why they want to accelerate those companies’ demise, stop them from expanding, push them out of Northern Ireland, have them dismiss employees in their area, or ensure that their wages are held down.

For our part, when we stated in the Programme for Government that we believe that our priority should be

economic growth, that is what we meant. It would have been wholly inconsistent for the Government to say that we want to drive towards economic growth, expect to have better productivity, and expect to improve our gross value added (GVA), and, at the same time, create a more difficult situation for the sector that can contribute towards increasing our GVA, better productivity, and growth in our economy.

I trust that the Assembly will support the motion. I hope that I have managed to cover all the substantive points that have been raised by Members — if I have not, I will write to the Members concerned when I read Hansard.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves the Rates (Industrial Hereditaments) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Grain Scarcity

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

One amendment has been selected and published in the Marshallled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for the winding-up speech.

5.00 pm

Mr Savage: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the scarcity of grain within Europe, which is having a detrimental effect on the profits of the production sector, as a result of higher grain prices; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide intervention support to the intensive production sector that relies upon grain.

I thank the Minister for her attendance at this debate, amid many pressures and concerns at the present time, including bluetongue. It is most appreciated.

I do not have a problem with the tabled amendment, although others may have different opinions.

Before I continue, I declare an interest as a farmer myself. I have first-hand experience of feeling the pinch as a result of the grain price rises.

'The Guardian' put the situation perfectly on 26 February 2008, when it said:

"In the last year, however, creeping rises quickened to a canter — and then a gallop."

This issue would make an excellent case study for students of economics. Thankfully, the Members for East Antrim Mr Sammy Wilson and Mr Roy Beggs are in the Chamber today, and may correct me if I make any mistakes. We agree that the definition of value is how much someone is prepared to pay for something. The rise in grain prices is caused by more demand than there is supply, at the current time. The value of the required commodity will keep rising.

According to the International Grains Council, global wheat inventories have fallen to their lowest levels since 1979. That is because sowing in the northern hemisphere is down, particularly in Canada, due to the poor weather having an adverse effect on the crop. In the southern hemisphere, the main supplier, Australia, has slashed its forecasts from its usual 20 to 25 million tons to 12.1 million tons, owing to extreme drought across the country. That drought also reduced Australia's dairy output by 15%. Furthermore, according to the BBC news on 26 February 2008, a drought in northern China, where

most of the country's wheat is grown, is pushing the prices higher.

'The Economist' on 23 February 2008 said:

"America's Department of Agriculture believes global demand for wheat will continue to exceed supply this year. That will push America's wheat stocks to their lowest level since 1948."

We have all felt the pinch because of the lack of grain, and I am sure that all Members have noticed that the price of a loaf of bread has risen considerably over the past six months. Food industry executives expect the prices of meat, poultry and dairy products to rise, as farmers and processors pass on the higher costs to consumers.

That scarcity of grain causes difficulty at the farm gate. To put it simply, the farmer is no better off. Any rise in the milk cheque or the price of a kilogram of beef is offset by the rise in the cost of feed. That will only cause the industry to stagnate, and we cannot allow that to happen. According to volume 71, number 6 of the 'Northern Ireland Agricultural Market Report', prices of wheat and barley have risen steeply over the last year. Wheat costs 71% more, and barley is 60% more expensive.

That in turn leads to a cost impact for the farmer, as it takes roughly 10 kg of feed to produce 1 kg of beef. According to the Northern Ireland Grain Trade Association (NIGTA), feed material costs have risen by £80 per metric ton.

That rise in the cost of grain will result in the following additional costs to the farmer: an extra 30p per kilogram for pig production; an increase of 25% in the production costs of poultry; the cost of producing a dozen eggs will rise by 20p; intensive beef farming will cost an extra 40p per kilogram, and the cost of producing a litre of milk from an average dairy cow will rise by 3p.

Given the increase in the cost of grain, sooner or later farmers will have no option but to seek cheaper alternatives for animal feed. The farming industry does not want to go in that direction. I am not sure that it would be good for consumer confidence in the products, never mind the industry.

On 4 September 2007, the 'Financial Times' quoted the stark warning of several analysts:

"the world community is approaching a food crisis in 2008 unless usage of agricultural products for biofuels is curbed or ideal weather conditions and sharply higher crop yields are achieved in 2008".

The problem is that the United States devoted several million tons of grain to the production of ethanol. President Bush's target of producing 35 billion gallons of ethanol by 2017 requires — and Members must listen to the figure — 342 million tons of corn. Prices of corn and wheat in the United States have doubled in the past 12 months. It has 109 ethanol plants, and a

further 53 are being built. Yet the supply of grain is at an all-time low. A report in the 'Financial Times' on 17 February 2008 quoted the vice-president for government relations of the American Bakers Association. She said that grain:

"is currently at a very low one-month level, which is extremely concerning."

On 26 February 2008, the 'Guardian' reported:

"subsidies to biofuels, particularly in the US, are distorting global farming. The 60m tonnes of American maize being burned each year represents more than twice the UK's entire cereal crop."

Ethanol is one such biofuel that is being subsidised.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Member find it ironic that the environmentalists, who argue that there should be a move towards the increased use of biofuels, are encouraging a development that results in people starving throughout the world? In any case, biofuels are not even environmentally friendly.

Mr Savage: I thank the Member for his intervention: that was exactly the point that I was about to make.

Before outlining what I want the Minister to do to help the farming community, here is a sobering analysis by the Northern Ireland Grain Trade Association:

"Feed prices will increase by 50% on farms; farmgate prices need to go up by 25% to keep pace, and the retail price must move by 5% to 10% for the industry to survive."

On 10 September 2007, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development said in the House:

"they [the farmers] cannot be expected to continue to make losses against the massive, and increasing, input cost." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 23, p233, col 1*].

Every Member will agree with that statement. Several options are open to the Minister to enable her to provide badly needed assistance to the industry. Although I do not expect that an offer of financial assistance is on the table, never mind forthcoming, I ask her to consider other options. It is possible to lobby local retailers and supermarkets to ensure that farmers and producers receive a fair and reasonable price for their products. She must ensure that local retailers and supermarkets source only local products and that they label them to advertise the fact to consumers, who, I hope, will want to buy locally sourced products. I ask the Minister to consider those available options.

Finally, and most importantly, will the Minister do everything in her power to ensure that Northern Ireland farmers have a steady and more than adequate supply of grain to keep the agriculture industry alive in Northern Ireland?

The motion has forewarned of the food shortages that could happen in the near future. I do not want to raise fears or expectations that there will be a food scarcity, but if action is not taken, such a difficult situation could arise. In moving the motion, I trust that

the House will rally round and give its overwhelming support to the industry, which provides for the entire community on a daily basis.

Mr Bresland: I beg to move the following amendment: After "grain" insert

"and to lobby the European Union on the approval of new biotech varieties".

Mr Speaker, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak in the debate. I congratulate the Members who tabled the motion, and I say at the outset that the amendment does not aim to take away from the motion; rather, it aims to add to it.

Even if the Minister were to announce to the Assembly that she could intervene, such involvement would not be a long-term solution and would not tackle any of the factors that have pushed up the price of grain. It is vital that the Minister uses whatever influence she has to help to reduce the price that farmers are forced to pay for grain.

Northern Ireland's livestock sector has been under considerable pressure for several years. It faces challenges from the nitrates directive feed costs, fertiliser costs, and the power of the large supermarkets to drive down prices. Members understand that a local Minister cannot solve many of those problems, which exist on a global scale. However, it is important that she uses any influence that she has to change matters that could affect local farmers.

The amendment asks that the Minister lobby the European Commission on the approval of new grain varieties. The debate is not about whether genetically modified (GM) crops should be grown here; it is about the import of grain and the speed at which varieties are approved for import, particularly from countries such as America. Genetically modified varieties are already imported into Europe and will eventually end up being approved.

In the United States, the process for the approval of genetically modified varieties takes around 12 months. However, that process takes around 36 months in Europe. Although the Minister obviously does not have the power to solve that problem herself, she could give the Assembly her commitment that she will lobby the European Commission in order to speed up the approval process. The fact that it takes so long for those new varieties to be approved simply means that less grain is available for use by local farmers. If the approval process were speeded up, that could directly affect farmers in Northern Ireland. Solving that problem would also directly affect the price of grain and would come at no cost to the European Union or to DARD. Most importantly, it would save farmers money.

The power of the large supermarkets to drive prices down is another area of concern. Although the price of beef and lamb has improved recently, there is still a

considerable distance to go before farmers can make a sustainable profit. Part of that is due to the fact that there is constant pressure from supermarkets to drive down prices. When the public are being sold chickens that cost £1.99, there is no way that the farmer can make any profit. Every time that supermarkets reduce their prices, they demand that farmers receive less for their products.

Even when the prices on supermarkets shelves have been increased, as they have in recent months, the extra money is never passed down to the farmer. Members need only look at the profits that are made by supermarkets and compare them to those of many farmers, who do not make any money for their labour. Tesco has announced profits of nearly £2 billion from its own sales. Although those are the profits of just one supermarket chain, they are probably far in excess of the combined profits of every farmer throughout the UK.

I am sure that everyone in the House supports the farmers in their plight. It is important that the Minister does whatever possible to improve the conditions under which they struggle. I hope that Members will support the call for action to be taken in areas that will directly affect farmers.

DARD should also look at ways to develop skills in the farming community so that farmers can react to the challenge of growing cereals. Although that may have a limited impact, many Northern Ireland farmers are interested in growing cereals but have a limited knowledge of the subject.

I support the amendment. The issues that it raises could benefit our farmers. I hope that Members support the amendment because it seeks to add to the original motion.

5.15 pm

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin is opposed to GM crops being grown in Ireland.

According to the Confederation of the Food and Drink Industries of the European Union, prices for wheat, dairy products and sunflower oil in the EU rose by 35%, 50% and 25% respectively in 2007. As a result, the price of food products made directly from those commodities, such as bread, pasta and other dietary basics, and those made indirectly, such as pork, poultry, beef, milk and eggs, is on the rise. There are three main reasons for the drastic rise in price: the increasing use of crops for bio-energy, particularly in the USA; an increase in the demand for meat and milk products in the developing world, particularly in China and India — as the economies of those countries flourish, so does the lifestyle and diet of the people there; and poor harvests around the world after droughts and floods, particularly in Australia.

The effects of climate change cannot be ignored. We are merely paying lip service to sustainability. Our farming community requires support so that it can be sustainable in every aspect of its business.

Mr Allan Bresland outlined the crux of the issue — the stranglehold on the agriculture industry. That appears to benefit only the supermarkets, which have still managed large increases in profit margins since the price increases began. The ultimate challenge is to find a way to loosen the grip of the supermarkets on an already overburdened industry. Finding other adequate outlets for marketing food products without such an expensive middleman is vital. We must ensure that our farmers receive a substantial return for their produce, as well as encouraging and developing co-operatives.

Bakery firms are also under pressure to raise customer prices to combat high commodity prices, which, they say, is a necessary strategy to maintain profitability. Prices are rising at almost unprecedented levels, so passing on cost is a business strategy that bakers can no longer ignore, even if it risks angering consumers.

Other industries are under pressure, including microbreweries. While those industries face pressures, consumers face a massive increase in their food bills, along with drastic rises in their fuel bills. That puts immense pressure on the most vulnerable in our society. Young families and pensioners find it very hard to make ends meet.

In respect of global demand, the world's population is expected to exceed nine billion by 2050. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations predicts that food demand will have grown by 55% between 1998 and 2030. The increased use of biofuels will also make demands on crops. The consensus is that the area of land cultivated globally is not likely to increase much in the shorter term.

Water shortages, particularly in Asia, are another threat to increasing the production of agricultural commodities to meet increased demand.

A report by independent research organisation Chatham House states that, since 1980, the rate of new oil discoveries has not kept pace with growth in demand. Rising oil prices have impacted on fertiliser production.

The report states that there is a consensus that commodity prices will remain high over the medium term, partly because of the predicted demand-supply imbalance. It speculates that the EU may be forced into acceptance of supply-boosting GM commodities.

Some 85% of the Chatham House project participants who were interviewed said that they believed that a different food supply dynamic is in prospect.

The report concludes that, in the long term, global supply may not be able to meet demand unless there is sustainable management of global resources, with

constraints on the supply of land, water and oil demanding particular attention. Any imbalance is likely to be felt through further inflationary effects and increased competition to secure global supplies.

Industry commentary underlines the scarcity:

"World grain prices have increased dramatically on three occasions since World War II, each time as the result of weather-reduced harvests. But now it is a matter of demand simply outpacing supply. In seven of the last eight years world grain production has fallen short of consumption. These annual shortfalls have been covered by drawing down grain stocks, but the carryover stocks — the amount in the bin when the new harvest begins — have now dropped to 54 days of world consumption, the lowest on record ... As grain prices climb, a politics of food scarcity is emerging, as exporting countries restrict exports to limit the rise in domestic food prices. At the end of January, Russia — one of the top five wheat exporters — will impose a 40 per cent export tax on wheat, effectively banning exports."

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

Mr W Clarke: In conclusion —

Mr Deputy Speaker: We are very tight for time.

Mr P J Bradley: I had better watch my time.

At the beginning of the debate, Sammy Wilson said that farmers are now living in a world driven by environmentalists. In the previous two decades, farmers have been regularly forced to deal with Government edicts totally contrary to what farming was, and is, all about.

Many farmers saw the writing on the wall when the UK Government dropped "agriculture" from the title of the Department responsible for the farming industry. The agriculture industry in the United Kingdom, which current political arrangements make it impossible for us to escape from, or, should I say, to which we are inextricably linked — I have heard that before — means that turning to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for assistance in a European context would be a pointless exercise.

Farmers have always been conscientious custodians of the countryside, and were never the threat to the environment or wildlife that some bureaucrats would have us believe. The plethora of anti-farming measures has resulted in the decline of real farming activity. Many hundreds of acres of the best land in Europe are now gradually in decline, and that can be seen in each of the Six Counties. There is now stagnation where once there was activity. Prime production land is no longer used to grow grain, potatoes or root crops. In some areas there is now nothing but gorse, bracken, briars and broom where there once was lush grass.

I know that this is quite demanding, but I call on the Minister to provide intervention support to the sector so heavily dependent on grain — as the motion requests — and to devise a plan that would see a return to crop-growing activity on family farms. What is the long-term future of farming? Does it have a long-term future?

If the grain predicament continues, should the millers and feed suppliers be permitted to introduce genetically modified grain to our shores? That is an easy question to ask, but less easy to answer. The world is greatly divided on the issue of genetically modified crops, and when the subject is debated, those for and against the argument usually break down on a 50:50 basis. We must continue to side with those who know and have authentic concerns about genetically modified products. By the same token, we must not be influenced by the utterances of single-issue groups that express opposition simply for opposition's sake, without any backup for their argument.

I stand open to correction, but I believe that all political parties in the Assembly are opposed to the growing of genetically modified crops in Ireland. The SDLP's policy is to remain opposed to that. However, I accept that one day the findings of scientists might suggest that we rethink our stance, but only a rigorous scientific and ethical process of verification will command attention. Research into GM agriculture must continue, however, and should be given the necessary finances by Government to permit the research needed into what is undeniably the fastest growing agricultural technology in the history of farming. It should be noted that 250 million acres of genetically modified crops were grown around the world in 2006, and there have been no reports of ill effects on the people who consumed those crops.

Given the present grain situation, I understand the reason for the amendment, although I will not be supporting it. However, I have concerns about the uncertainty that surrounds genetically modified products. My party could have supported the original motion, but I understand that we will not be given an opportunity to do that.

I have every sympathy for the Minister, as it seems that some new crisis comes her way every week. I wish her well on this matter, as it is the key to the survival of many farmers. However, I have no suggestion as to where she will find the money or what she will do.

Mr Neeson: Grain scarcity is a worldwide problem, and its causes lie well outside Northern Ireland and, indeed, Europe. Although there were poor harvests in parts of Europe last year, grain producers in many parts of the world are recording bumper crops. MPs in Australia are worried that some of this year's record harvest will be left in the fields. After years of declining production levels, Chinese grain production reached its highest level for almost a decade in 2007.

The International Grains Council estimates that world grain production was 1.66 billion tons in 2007 — the largest crop on record. However, the price of grain on the world market has hit another record. Record prices are being driven by two factors, both of

which are well outside the control of the Assembly. First, there is the growing prosperity of many people in Asia and Latin America. In 1985, the average person in China ate 20 kg of meat a year. Today, that figure is 50 kg. The pigs and chickens that are eaten by Chinese and Brazilian consumers must be reared on grain. People in the developing world have every right to demand the same standard of living that we take for granted. Secondly, there is ethanol production. 'The Economist' reckons that one third of the American corn harvest goes to ethanol production. Given concern over global warming, that is another driver of high prices that is not going to change.

Agricultural support policies are supposed to minimise the impact of cycles of boom and bust on producers and consumers. The high price of grain is not the result of a short-term economic cycle; it is the result of long-term changes in the global economy.

The high price of grain affects us all. Not only is the intensive agricultural producer affected by high prices, the shopper who pays more for a loaf of bread is affected equally, as is the employer who must pay higher wages as food prices drive up inflation. Economically, it is not rational to try to subsidise one's way out of a long-term problem. That only encourages wasteful, subsidy-driven production, which is a problem that we have seen demonstrated repeatedly over three decades thanks to the common agricultural policy. Favouring one section of the economy in dealing with a problem that affects everyone adds even more distortions to the economy. It is a classic example of robbing Peter to pay Paul.

The only people who benefit from high prices are grain producers, so why do we not encourage farmers to use more land for grain production. With modern farming techniques, it is feasible to grow corn in more areas than ever before, and barley-growing is an option on all but the most marginal land. That is how the Northern Ireland economy can benefit from high grain prices.

The proposal contained in the motion is economically wasteful, and it is probably illegal under European law anyway — that point must be taken into consideration. I am sure that the Minister understands that, under EU regulations, difficulties would be put in her way if she were to try to implement the suggestions that are being brought before the Assembly today.

It is vitally important that supermarkets give food producers and livestock farmers the prices they deserve, taking into consideration the extra costs they now face. Although I agree with the sentiment behind the motion, the reality is somewhat different.

5.30 pm

Mr T Clarke: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. The Agriculture

Committee has heard evidence from groups such as the Ulster Pork and Bacon Forum, the Ulster Farmers' Union and also from the wider rural community of the problems that they face. It is vital that we take what action we can to help. High grain prices have various causes, many of them global and beyond our control; however, it is important that the Minister use what influence she has to make an impact where she can.

I draw the Assembly's attention to the approval of new crops for import into the European Union. The issue is important: it has a direct impact on the grain prices paid by local farmers. However, it may be misunderstood by Members and by the wider public.

As my colleague Mr Bresland said, the debate is not about whether we support the growing of GM crops in Northern Ireland; that may be a debate worth having, but it is not one for today. This is simply about the import of GM varieties, particularly from countries such as America. GM varieties are already imported into Europe, although in relatively small quantities, so the principle has already been accepted that they are safe to import and, therefore, safe to use.

It takes the EU three times as long as the US to approve crops for use. It is not that Europe will never approve those crops: it just takes far too long. Because the pace of development is so fast and new varieties are approved so quickly in other parts of the world, Europe's slowness creates a self-imposed grain shortage for our farmers. More and more of the new varieties are grown and demand across the world increases rapidly, particularly in developing countries. Imports into the EU are limited by the non-approval of crops. Increasing world demand, combined with a shortage of supply to Europe, will mean higher prices.

It is also worth thinking about what happens when we do not approve crops. The EU is quick to stop the import of crops, but it has no problem in importing cheap beef or chicken that is fed on those crops and produced with animal welfare standards that would be illegal in the EU. Our farmers want a level playing field; they should not have to struggle with a self-imposed stranglehold.

I hope that all Members understand the real issue in the debate, make no knee-jerk reaction to the mention of GM crops and support the amendment. I hope that the Minister does all in her power to help our hard-pressed farmers and makes a commitment to lobby the European Commission on the approval of those varieties. Our farmers are suffering and lose money daily.

I support the amendment.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the debate and the opportunity to speak on it.

I declare an interest as a farmer — not as a grain farmer, but as a farmer all the same. As a beef farmer, I

have first-hand experience of the problems caused by rising grain prices.

Some may believe that the issue is unimportant or that it affects only farmers. They could not be more wrong. An increase in beef prices has a knock-on effect on all related food groups, as farmers see their profit margins evaporate, yet they have still to pay high prices for livestock feed. Supermarkets will seek to pass on any increase to the consumer; that means more expensive food in shopping baskets. That will raise inflation generally and turn a farming problem into a political one.

It is estimated that, for the past 15 years, there has been a decline in the cost of food in the UK and Europe. That is what consumers want, and they have come to expect their politicians to deliver it. However, in recent months consumers have begun to experience an increase in the cost of food, and if that trend continues, there will be political consequences. One of the main problems is that the price of bread, one of our staple foods, will be affected by the increase in the price of grain.

On 28 February this year, the 'Belfast Telegraph' predicted that there would be an increase of £18 per week in the average family shopping basket. The Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association is also concerned that the cost of groceries could increase by 20% in 2008.

That will impact on us all, but it will especially hit people on low and fixed incomes, who are already struggling to make ends meet. If difficult times lie ahead for consumers, difficult times are already with the pig industry. For some time, I and others have been warning about the crisis in the local pig industry, and the situation has shown no improvement.

On 17 February, 'The Observer' estimated that pig farmers across the UK are in crisis because huge increases in grain prices mean that they are losing up to £20 for every animal that they produce. Experts warn that the industry faces an end unless the price of pork and bacon rises, but such a move has so far been rejected by supermarkets. 'The Observer' reported that global wheat prices have doubled in a year to £180 a ton, owing to soaring demand for grain in India and China. The decision by an increasing number of farmers to switch from wheat to maize for biofuels is also being blamed. As feed comprises 50% of pig farmers' costs, the rise in the price of wheat is proving disastrous for them — even though bacon is the country's most frequently eaten meat, with the average household getting through 50 bacon sandwiches a year. It is little wonder that a spokesman for the British Pig Executive said:

"The industry is close to meltdown; it has had its share of difficulties in the past but never anything on this scale and this suddenly".

Increased grain prices have consequences far beyond the obvious, and, if unchecked, they have the potential to cause problems for farmers, consumers and even the Government, due to increased food prices and inflationary pressures in the economy. The Government must not ignore the situation and must intervene to stabilise grain prices, prevent food prices from increasing any further and prevent a bad situation from getting worse.

Mr S Wilson: I am not a livestock farmer, a grain farmer or a "farmer all the same", whatever that means. However, as Members can see, I do help to contribute to the consumption of those 50 bacon sandwiches a year. In fact, I am well above the average for bacon sandwich consumption. I do my bit for the rural part of my constituency with great gusto.

Like Sean Neeson, I have concerns about any call to distort the market by asking the Minister to consider further subsidies for the farming industry. That cannot be sustained in the long run. Although there may be a case for short-term intervention, the flavour of the DUP amendment is to take away from the subsidy aspect of the issue. The amendment is designed to look towards the long term and see how we can exploit our climate, and research into new crops, to try to address the problem that we currently face.

Mr Armstrong: We farmers do not want subsidies.

Mr S Wilson: I am referring to the motion, which calls for "intervention". I accept that that intervention might only be short-term.

As other Members have said, one of the reasons why we must be careful is that the industry faces international pressures. Regardless of what the Minister does, those cannot be resisted. There is increased demand for food in China and India, and we have no control over changing weather conditions.

As the Assembly may be aware, I won an award from the Green Party last year, and this is the start of my bid to win it again in 2008. The Green Party circulates cards saying that because of global warming we must find new ways to generate fuel and suggests that we grow crops to convert to ethanol. Despite calls made in the House today, if we use agricultural land to grow crops to turn into fuel, the impact will be that supply will not keep up with demand.

Members are aware of the increases in prices, and I do not have time to go over that again. However, the amount of grain required to be converted to ethanol to fill up my car fortnightly would, in a year, amount to enough to feed an entire African village. That is the impact of following the green lobby's route. Europe is now setting us targets that state that, by 2020, biofuels must account for 10% of fuel used for transport. If we meet that target, 40% of agricultural land in Europe will be used to grow crops — not to eat, but to power cars and lorries. Globally, there will be huge shortages.

We must be aware of those consequences before blindly following the green lobby, which seems to have captivated everyone.

Biofuels are not environmentally friendly anyway, because producing them means cutting down forests, and in doing so, it becomes more difficult to absorb CO₂ emissions. Ethanol produces about 70% of the CO₂ emissions of ordinary petrol, so that measure will not lead to a significant reduction in emissions. If the Minister must intervene in the short term to deal with grain shortages, then so be it. However, if there is any point to this debate, the House must remember that when it makes choices, those measures that appear innocuous at the time will have greater consequences and will lead to the kind of problems that have been highlighted.

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

Mr Burns: I share the concerns expressed by most other Members. This is a unique situation; oil prices in the world market are going through the roof, and the price of heating oil is unsustainable. We will have to use our agricultural land to produce fuel for heating.

Those of us on the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development know that the red meat industry is going through a difficult period. Farming is based on economics, and we cannot expect farmers to produce food for no money. If farmers discover that huge profits can be made by growing grain, they will cease to keep cattle and sheep, and the sight that we traditionally associate with the countryside — farm animals in fields — will disappear, because farmers will simply grow crops for the biofuel industry. That would be a very sad road for our agricultural industry to take. Instead of a food-production industry, it would, in essence, become a biofuel industry that produces fuel for home heating, and to power cars and public transport.

It would be a great waste if the grain that could be produced and that should be milled for bread to feed people went instead into some form of fuel. That would be a great waste of the land.

5.45 pm

However, our Minister has no control whatsoever over the price of oil. Does she have any control over what farmers decide to do with their land? Perhaps it is the case that a big business bank manager comes to talk to the farmer after he has lost so much money, to suggest that there is more money in growing crops, and offering a loan for growing crops but no more money for animals.

This is a serious situation in which the entire agriculture industry finds itself. Also, it is not just a problem facing us here: it is worldwide. I am keen to hear suggestions as to how the Minister and the

Assembly are going to tackle the problem. I support the motion.

Mrs I Robinson: This topic is of huge importance to everyone in this country but it is one that may not, perhaps, be as immediately obvious to consumers as to the farmers and food producers of Northern Ireland. In fact, were you to go into any high street across Northern Ireland and ask the average shopper what they thought of the crisis in grain provision, they would probably just give you a blank stare. The truth is that producers and consumers across Northern Ireland are going to pay — quite literally — for the current shortage in grain supply.

In the past, a rise of £20 per ton over a year was considered high. We now have a situation whereby prices have risen by £20 in one day. Those costs are now being filtered down to the consumer, who will see the price of food increase substantially in the next year. One major concern about the provision of grain is the effort being made in many countries to provide incentives for farmers to diversify into the field of biofuels. At a time when grain prices were low and biofuels were being trumpeted as a sustainable and environmentally-friendly alternative to fossil fuels, the associated incentives proved very successful, not least in the USA. Thus a situation developed whereby grain that was once produced for the agriculture industry is now going into the fuel industry. As Americans say; the grain is no longer going into bullocks but into Buicks.

The clincher in all this is that scientific studies into the use of biofuels have proved that they are not really any better than fossil fuels. Biofuels have therefore little or no positive environmental impact; and, the drive to divert grain for this use has contributed to the current global shortage of grain, forcing prices up and increasing the pressure on farm businesses that are already struggling to remain financially viable.

The EU has targets for the production of grain for biofuels, aiming for between one sixth and one quarter of all arable land to be used for the production of biofuels by 2020. There has even been talk of that figure being doubled to between one third and one half of all land. At present, we are not even close to meeting the initial target yet we are faced with huge problems in the supply of grain to the agriculture industry. Just imagine what it would be like if the EU got its way.

There has been talk of issuing incentives for farmers to produce as much grain as possible to meet world demand. The EU tried that strategy before and created all sorts of problems — butter mountains and suchlike. Before adopting a similar initiative, we would need to be sure that it would be implemented in such a way so as to address the problems without creating new ones. Inevitably, there would be a negative impact on the environment, with extra land having to be used for

grain production. In recent years, when the industry has been under huge pressure, many farmers have taken advantage of Government grants to transform land into areas of conservation.

The prices of grain are so high that the only reason that a farmer would persist with conservation measures would be out of the goodness of his heart. That would mean working at a loss, and it would be a difficult decision for any businessman.

Another option to consider is the use of new biotech varieties of grain, which could be used to maximise output from available land. The bottom line is that the agrifood industry is worth some £2.5 billion a year to the Northern Ireland economy and employs around 80,000 people — 15% of the workforce. Those issues must be addressed, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

Mr Shannon: All Members are aware of the importance of grain not only in food but in alcohol production; those of us who have a whisky will be aware of its use in alcohol production, and we are also aware of its use as vehicle fuel. Consequently, the current severe grain shortage in Europe will affect not only farmers seeking to feed their livestock — and issue to which Members have referred — but every person in the Province as supermarket prices rise on bread and meat products, and other items that they may not even have considered. Feed grains have risen in price faster than petrol and, like fossil fuels, are set to redefine their supply chains.

Farmers, meat processors, enzyme makers and even fossil fuel companies will have their world redefined by trends that are now reshaping the feed grain sector. There is a variety of factors behind those trends, such as the heatwave of 2003 during which Europe bore the brunt of rising temperatures. That record-breaking heatwave claimed 35,000 lives in eight countries and withered grain harvests in almost every European country, from France in the west to Ukraine in the east. The resulting reduction of some 30 million tons in Europe's grain production was equal to half the entire US wheat harvest. That reduction, coupled with the fact that fewer farmers are growing grain, means that Europe has gone from being a major grain exporter to being an importer. Anyone in that business knows that when need rises, the price rises with it.

That is the situation in which farmers in the Province currently find themselves. For that reason, I support the amendment and ask the Department and the Minister to step in to put support mechanisms in place that will head off the crisis. This issue affects not only my constituency of Strangford but all constituencies across the Province. The agriculture sector is the biggest employer in Strangford — and, indeed, in the Province — and I ask for something more than mere scratchings

of heads and wringing of hands for people in that sector. A huge number of people depend on the Minister and the Department to respond positively.

I have a meat-supply business and I have grass-roots — excuse the pun — experience of the adverse effects that are already being felt Province-wide. I have spoken to butchers and farmers who have expressed their concerns over the price of grain and the fact that they cannot keep up with it. Last week, some farmers told me that they are not feeding any grain at all to their cattle, sheep or lambs. They are putting their animals out in the grass early, and we all know there is not much growth in the grass. What effect will that have on the businesses of those farmers? They are caught between a rock and a hard place.

Some people suggest that the USA is controlling grain exportation throughout North and South America purposely, and that that has a tangible effect on Europe. However, it is beyond my powers to fight that battle, and I will leave it to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to respond to that issue. A spokesman for the US Grains Council has said that Europe has a real problem with grain supplies. We are hearing that:

“importers in Europe were indicating that they will need 17 to 18 million metric tons of feed grains in 2008.”

That is an indication of how bad the situation is.

If the problem is recognised in the US, undoubtedly the issue will have been flagged up long before now. I put it to the Minister that it is time for something to be done. She is held in high esteem because of her positive response to the recent outbreak of bluetongue, and today I exhort her to respond to the problems facing the grain industry and those farmers who depend on grain to feed their cattle, sheep and lambs. The lifting of EU import duties and tariffs is not enough to offset the problem, and bigger steps must be taken quickly before things get out of hand.

Farmers are in dire need of support, and it is vitally important that the Assembly provides that support across the Province. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development must show that she is doing all she can to help farmers buy grain at a reasonable price — one that will not boost the price to the meat supplier, who will then boost the price to the butcher, who will, in turn, boost the price to the consumer.

Grain products are not luxuries; they are necessities. It is not an offer of optional Government assistance that is needed; it is an obligation by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, which it must fulfil while it can, to improve the lives of the people — and that includes everyone in this House — who depend on the agriculture sector. I support the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The business on the Order Paper will not be disposed of by 6.00 pm. Therefore, in

accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue until it is completed or until 7.00 pm.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Savage and Mr Elliott for raising this issue today. I also want to put on record my appreciation of Mr Savage's opening remarks. The matter merits debate since it is clearly very important for people involved in agriculture, especially in the intensive sectors, who rely on grain. I share the concerns raised by Mr Savage, and other Members. Before dealing with the specific points that have been raised, I will set out some of the background to the current grain scarcity and the issues relating to support in the intensive production sector.

We have heard how, globally, agriculture has experienced a rapidly growing demand for grain and a significant rise in prices. That has been driven by growing demand for biofuels; expanding demand in the world economy, and falling stocks of most types of grain. I share the view of other Members that bio-ethanol is not the solution to all of our problems. If further money were spent on developing wind and wave energy, those sources would provide a more sustainable way of meeting our energy needs.

The droughts in Australia and the States coupled with poor growing conditions in Europe have resulted in world grain reserves reaching a record low; and over the last three years, there has been a 159% rise in the price of wheat. The difficulties being encountered by the intensive sector are as a direct consequence of the global rise in cereal and protein prices.

I am very mindful, too, of the challenges facing the pig sector. The average market price for finished clean pigs over the 2007 calendar year fluctuated between 101·35p and 96·17p per kg dead weight, while the feed cost per finished clean pig rose from £57·22 to £73·84. Those figures indicate clearly that this is a difficult time for the pig sector. My Department is providing substantial resources at farm level to aid compliance with the environmental restrictions, thus demonstrating our commitment to the future of a sustainable pig industry. Support is also being provided to producers under integrated pollution prevention and control legislation.

The poultry sector in the North has also been affected by the rising costs of feedstuff. Feed costs amount to 66% of the total production costs for broiler chickens, and about 60% of egg production costs. That has created significant challenges for the sector, in addition to the pressures that have been created by importing from countries whose agriculture sectors operate under different standards and circumstances.

However, many primary producers have been shielded from the market due to the vertical integration

model that is widely used in poultry businesses. Due to the nature of contracts between poultry producers and processors, and the forward-buying policies employed by them, the impact of increased feed costs on primary producers has been less significant. It is encouraging, though, to note that egg prices have risen in the past few months to take account of those higher input costs. Through innovation and new product development, the poultry processing sector works hard to add value and stay ahead of the competition in what is a very aggressive market.

I am pleased to say that the dairy sector, which has experienced a 28% rise in milk prices, is in a relatively strong position to deal with the cereals crisis. Although the dairy sector uses concentrates as a feeding supplement, it is a grass-based enterprise, and the rise in milk prices has helped to cushion the effects of increasing concentrate prices.

Although the dairy sector is doing well, we have already heard from a number of Members that the red meat sector is facing significant challenges. The decoupling of subsidies has started to bring home the sector's unprofitability at current market prices. In an unprecedented step, key stakeholders from the sector worked with the Government to establish the Red Meat Industry Task Force; with the objective of assessing the industry's position and developing options for the future. That work resulted, as Members will know, in the Red Meat Industry Task Force report, which was published in October 2007. It clearly indicates the serious challenges facing the beef and lamb sectors.

Action to address those challenges is now under way, and I assure Members that DARD, in partnership with the industry, will play a full part in that process. The report points out a range of challenges to which the industry must respond positively.

6.00 pm

Although prices have risen slightly over the past couple of months, there do not appear to be any major price rises around the corner. I have no influence over retail prices; however, in my opinion, production cost increases cannot be borne by the primary producer. The rest of the supply chain, including the consumer, must also bear part of that burden. The feed price and cost imbalance throughout the industry cannot persist, and, when European production falls in response to those pressures, there will be an EU-wide adjustment in intensive production sector prices. That represents the only long-term and sustainable solution to the problem of higher feed-input costs, which seems destined to persist. In the meantime, Mr Clarke's suggestion about using co-operatives and collective buying power whenever possible in order to keep prices down is certainly of value.

In support of the local industry, in recent months, I have personally engaged in several initiatives. I met with Ministers Ruane and McGimpsey in order to consider developing and expanding local food-sourcing initiatives in the education and health sectors. In addition, I have also discussed with my colleagues the matter of increased public procurement of local produce, and I am working with the UFU in an attempt to get through the current difficulties.

Given the rising cost of feed prices, I wrote to every supermarket expressing my concern about producer level returns, and I am aware there has been a subsequent rise in some retail prices. Hopefully, those increased returns will work back through the supply chain to improve the farmgate price.

I am also pleased by the supermarkets' positive response to the industry's collective initiative to identify and promote locally produced food through the Good Food is in Our Nature campaign. Although he is not here, I hope that Sammy Wilson is taking cognisance of that; if he buys locally produced bacon, his 50 bacon sandwiches a week will certainly help.
[Laughter.]

Concerning support for the pig sector, following a meeting with representatives of that sector, including some from the Ulster Farmers' Union, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in order to urge support for the reintroduction of pig-sector export refunds. I also wrote to Mary Coughlan TD about that matter.

Although the European Commission is extremely reluctant to use export refunds — and it takes a great deal of pressure from EU member states to persuade it to act — under such pressure, export refunds were introduced. Therefore, further export refund increases would be difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, the Department, through Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), continues to support research and development work, which provides an important science and expertise base.

The recently established Pig ReGen Ltd is an additional resource to help to improve the production and quality of pigs here.

Concerning the red-meat sector, my Department is publicly committed to working with those people who want to stay in the industry and secure a more viable future, and we will also help people who wish to seek other opportunities. In addition, we will encourage producers to develop their businesses through training, benchmarking and adopting the latest technology. I am fully engaged in the taskforce's work to develop constructive relationships across the supply chain, and I will personally continue to engage with all parts of that chain.

The Department is also considering options that support farmers who choose to diversify or seek other opportunities. Such options will be supported by the rural development programme, which I announced in summer 2007. Options include a bespoke programme for farming families in the red-meat sector, involving intense and targeted training, mentoring and information sessions, all of which are designed to assist farmers in making the right choice in a difficult situation.

My Department continues to support the intensive production sector in every way possible. The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) provides a comprehensive range of education and training programmes for producers and processors, and DARD's supply chain development branch helps groups of farmers to work together with industry partners in order to improve returns and, if diversification is the desired course of action, to consider potential options. My Department also provides support through its new entrants scheme, which can subsidise loans in order to facilitate restructuring or investment.

EU funding will be available in order to develop and expand profitable and sustainable markets and to encourage better co-operation and communication between all food-industry sectors. That funding will be delivered under axis 1 of the rural development programme, specifically the agricultural and forestry processing and marketing grant scheme and the supply chain development programme.

The agricultural marketing development grant scheme is scheduled to open in the summer and will assist with developing marketing capabilities. Although the provision of further financial support through the state aid route is worth considering, the problem with state aid is that, in the short time frame, it would not provide immediate relief to producers. It is more likely that a rebalancing of the market would have taken place before such a measure could achieve any significant impact.

I am aware that France has been able to provide financial support to producers using *de minimis* state aid, which has recently been increased to allow a payment of up to €7,500 per producer over a three-year period without the need to secure state aid approval. However, that *de minimis* aid, which comes in the form of subsidised loans, is permitted only if the gross grant equivalent has been calculated on the basis of market interest rates prevailing at the time of the grant. I have concerns about encouraging producers to get into increased debt, using borrowed money at a reduced rate to subsidise continued production. Members will appreciate — and many have noted today — that I am not in a position to provide further direct financial support without EU Commission approval.

The current global grain market situation and reforms to the CAP mean that there are limited policy

tools available to the commission to influence the world, or, indeed EU, grain price. Current intervention stocks are very small, and those have all been committed for sale. However, set-aside has been reduced to zero, and very early indications would suggest that EU grain production will increase this year, although I appreciate that that will take some time to have an impact and that weather conditions will be crucial to the level of future production. I must point out that the provision for intervention support operates at EU level and is not in the power of the Assembly.

Moving on to the amendment, I am aware of the long delays in Brussels in the authorisation of genetically modified food and feed varieties for import growing and processing in the EC. I know that grain exporters and importers have been reluctant to bring feed supplies into Europe since it is unlawful to import an unauthorised GM variety into the EC — even if it is in tiny traces of accidental contamination in a large consignment of grain. Although the authorisation, in October 2007, for the import of Herculex and two other types of GM maize and a type of sugar beet has helped supply, there remains a backlog of applications with the EC. The problems of those delays, which many Members have mentioned, will not be easily resolved.

As regards the Commission speeding up approval for GM products, it is also important that the Commission carefully considers each application as it must take into account human health concerns. I will continue to watch developments carefully in that area. It is for the industry to decide whether it chooses to use GM products that are currently available in the EU. To date, very few in the industry have chosen to do so, due to the dangers of cross-contamination and a consumer desire for products not fed on GM produce. Therefore a speeded-up process at the Commission may not solve that problem. Furthermore, a number of retailers, such as Tesco and Sainsbury's, have made a commitment to use non-GM products in their own-brand products. So there is a desire, driven by consumers, to exclude GM varieties from food.

Locally, the Food Standards Agency leads on the aspects of GM, and DOE is involved where there are environmental considerations. I have met senior executives from the major supermarkets and encouraged them to take into account the rising input costs faced by producers and processors, and to increase the amount of produce sourced here. I am very concerned about the current situation facing the intensive-production sectors. I would like to take the action necessary to influence the cereals or the intensive-production markets, but we are a very small regional player in a very large EU market, and, as such, cannot significantly influence the markets at EU level. Although I cannot provide any additional funding, my Department will assist in whatever way it

can to help producers develop new production systems for the intensive-production sector, with a view to satisfying the demands of, or need for, new market opportunities.

In conclusion, further subsidy, even in the short term, will not be practical or realistic; however, I will certainly consider any suggestions the intensive-production sectors, or my colleagues, have to offer that might ease the situation facing the pig, meat and poultry sectors. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Irwin: I thank Members for bringing the matter to the House today, and I declare an interest as a farmer.

Grain scarcity is fast becoming a major problem for an already struggling agricultural industry. The intensive-production sector is hit hardest, which is an issue that has been flagged up to me in recent times by beef, pork and poultry producers. On each occasion the message is the same: farmers cannot continue to produce the product if production costs outweigh the farm-gate prices.

Not enough grain is produced in Northern Ireland, mainland Britain and the Republic of Ireland to satisfy domestic demands. We all rely heavily on imports. It is a vicious circle. For a country the size of the United Kingdom, the grain-scarcity issue is worrying.

On a world scale, with the West trying to find alternative sources for fuel, the major fuel producers are taking a keener interest in the use of industrial corn for the production of ethanol. Replacing the millions of hectares normally used for the production of edible corn had devastating consequences in Mexico, as the people witnessed a 400% increase in the price of corn-related foodstuffs.

Grain producers such as Kazakhstan, Russia, Argentina and Mexico have curbed exports as a result of internal political pressure. The people in those countries could not afford the food that was derived from the grain that they produced, as domestic supply was so tight. Such issues have contributed to the massive drop in the worldwide availability of grain.

Europe used to be a major grain exporter, but it is now reported as requiring 18 million tons of grain this year. Changing from a net exporter to a net importer has further reduced the list of countries that can be relied upon to supply the rest of the world with grain. That, coupled with unfavourable weather conditions that restricted supply in Australia and Canada — two major exporters — will result in a crisis. That is a far cry from farmers having to put a percentage of their land into set-aside to curb production.

Although in Northern Ireland we have little control over the grain prices and supply, the effects are extremely serious. Intervention measures could be taken to help our industry cope in the short term. Such measures

would be welcomed; ultimately, however, they will not address the underlying issues that have led to grain shortages and soaring prices.

The agreement of the EU to import a larger range of biotech crops intended for animal feeds would be a positive step forward that would immediately help farmers. Such crops are being grown on an increasing scale in America, and would go some way to addressing the grain shortage.

Although the importation of many of those crops into Europe is not permitted, meat is allowed to be imported from countries that use biotech crops in meat production. Such meat imports are cheaper than the meat that our farmers can produce; therefore, they undercut and further destabilise our own industry. That is a disgraceful situation, and it is a total contradiction by the decision-makers in Europe.

The grain shortage has led to a rise in the prices of food in supermarkets. However, the rise in prices on the shelf is not reflected in the price that farmers receive. Farmers bear the brunt of increasing production costs. That situation cannot continue indefinitely.

An increase in the price that farmers receive for their product would go some way in lessening the burden on our industry. The EU must realise that approving cheap-meat imports is badly crippling our industry. Our farmers are being undercut by countries such as Thailand and Brazil, where production standards and costs are much lower.

The serious situation that faces the pig industry will be highlighted tomorrow when the National Pig Association converges on Downing Street to hand in a petition, signed by 10,000 people, that calls for producers to receive a fair amount for their products, or face the consequences — the collapse of the industry. The Minister would do well to add her voice to that protest.

I ask the Minister to take those matters seriously and to work to help our industry cope in what is a worrying time. Action that will sustain the industry in the longer term is required.

I call on the House to support the motion as amended.
6.15 pm

Mr Elliott: I place on record my thanks to all those who participated in the debate on this serious issue. I am particularly grateful to the Minister for her response. The Ulster Unionist Party is acutely aware of the limitations on what can be done.

The two main issues received significant mention during the debate. The first issue is the grain shortage and how much that costs. Members have talked at great length, and I will not rehash the arguments about how much land has been converted from producing

grain for food to producing biofuel. That has led to the shortage of grain to which Members referred.

Everyone knows that the US has always kept a three-month supply of grain in storage, but it now has only one month at the most. Were something to happen to grain production, within that time it would cause a shortage of grain in most areas of the world. The world relies heavily on the production of grain in the US and South America.

The Assembly may be able to have some impact on the second issue, which is the cost of the farmers' end product. I must declare an interest, as I am a farmer and a livestock producer. The days of cheap food in Northern Ireland are over, and people must get their heads round the new situation. For years, cheap food has been produced in, or imported into, Northern Ireland. Those days, or at least the days when such cheap food was also a quality product, are over.

People may still be able to buy cheap imported products from countries whose standards are not the same as those in Northern Ireland. Farmers are fed up with having to adhere to the high standards of food production in Northern Ireland. If meeting those standards gave their products a distinct and significant advantage over others on supermarket shelves, they would not mind.

Mr Shannon: Is the Member aware that, over the past month or six weeks, the price of beef in the shops has increased by 60p a kilogram? Surely that increase should be passed on to farmers.

Mr Elliott: I agree with the Member for Strangford that farmers should receive that increase, but they do not — or certainly not all of it. Farmers have been highlighting that problem for years. There is much too high a discrepancy between the price that consumers pay in supermarkets, the amount that the processor gets and how much the primary producer — the farmer — receives.

I am not sure whether legislation, or authority from Europe, would be required, but I ask the Minister to act on food labelling. If imported products are not up to the same standard as those produced in Northern Ireland, the consumer must be informed. The difficulty is that they are not and, therefore, a proper labelling regime is required. Otherwise, the situation will not be sustainable for local farmers. Too many are going out of business: in a few years, no local produce will even be available. That is the main basis of my argument.

I will go through a few issues that Members raised. Many Members highlighted similar issues. I thank my colleague, the proposer of the motion, George Savage, who described at length and in graphic detail the severe worldwide shortage of grain. He illustrated the shortage with specific evidence and highlighted the problems.

There was an intervention from Sammy Wilson, who talked about environmentalists who want to provide alternative fuels but who are having the opposite effect on the environment, whereby there will probably be an increase in food miles and a reduction in overall food production.

The proposer of the amendment, Allan Bresland, highlighted how the large supermarkets drive down the price of products.

He indicated that the amendment is designed to enhance the motion.

Willie Clarke of Sinn Féin put out his stall at the start of his contribution by explaining that his party is opposed to the growing of genetically modified products in Northern Ireland. I am not aware that any genetically modified products are being grown in Northern Ireland, or that there is the intention to do so in the near future. Mr Clarke also highlighted the global demands for food, specifically for grain products.

P J Bradley pointed out that farmers live in a world of environmentalists and that environmentalist pressure is being put on every Government throughout the world. He also touched on the thorny issue of genetically modified food. Sean Neeson mentioned that grain producers have recorded the highest production for years; perhaps the highest production that some regions have ever seen, which almost — excuse the pun — goes against the grain of the debate.

Trevor Clarke highlighted the amendment and the slow procedure that exists in the EU for the approval of new varieties of crops from the United States and, indeed, elsewhere. Billy Armstrong suggested some options to the Minister. He also mentioned the 50 bacon sandwiches that are consumed by each household every year. I wonder how much of that which is consumed is locally produced. That is a serious point, because that is one of the current downfalls. I assume that quite a lot of that product is imported.

I regret that Sammy Wilson is not in the Chamber at present. He discussed the intervention that is suggested in the motion. I want to assure Sammy and others in the Chamber that the motion does not call for subsidies or for further direct payments. It aims for a fair balance. Action can be taken that does not involve direct payments being made to farmers, a few of which I have highlighted: labelling; better supermarket prices; and some type of ombudsman. A report that was published just two weeks ago suggested that the food industry should have an ombudsman to ensure that a fair price for products is realised, from retailers right back to primary producers. Such an ombudsman is required. If that were in place, it would certainly improve the situation.

Thomas Burns indicated that the problem exists worldwide — which all Members accept. The problem

is not local to Northern Ireland, but exists throughout the world. Mrs Iris Robinson talked about the EU targets for biofuels. She indicated that Northern Ireland is nowhere near meeting those targets. That is quite clear. Therefore, the Assembly must strike a balance between growing biofuels and growing crops for food.

Jim Shannon highlighted the amount of grain that is used in the production of whisky. However, as he did not declare an interest, I do not know where he stands on that matter. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister, quite rightly, referred to feed costs in the intensive production sector, particularly that of pigs and poultry, in Northern Ireland. Clearly, the Assembly must get a handle on the situation. She also referred to the Red Meat Industry Task Force. I am pleased that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has organised and will host a seminar next week that will include a range of people from throughout the entire industry, such as retailers, consumers, supermarkets, processors and farmers.

William Irwin discussed the authorisation of grain from Europe, and the amendment. I hope that my understanding of the amendment is correct — that it does not seek to enforce the manufacture of genetically modified products in Northern Ireland. Those products are coming in anyway, folks. The motion and amendment simply aim to speed up the approval process. They call on the EU to speed up the process and to allow Northern Ireland the same opportunities as the rest of the world.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the scarcity of grain within Europe, which is having a detrimental effect on the profits of the production sector, as a result of higher grain prices; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide intervention support to the intensive production sector that relies upon grain, and to lobby the European Union on the approval of new biotech varieties.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Traffic Pollution in Dungiven

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the debate will have 10 minutes to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have three minutes.

Mr Dallat: I am conscious of the time constraints, so I will try to deliver my speech a lot faster than the traffic goes through Dungiven.

Members know that for many years money that was intended for the development of infrastructure — whether road or rail — was diverted to security and compensation claims. Hopefully, that is now part of history. However, what is not part of history is the legacy of neglect that has been left behind and the difficulties in dealing with that. The pieces must be picked up — that is the expectation of the people who supported the peace package.

One of the most shameful examples of neglect is the situation that the people of Dungiven find themselves in. How would anyone like to live in what is, officially, the most polluted town on these islands? That pollution is being caused by the huge volume of traffic, much of which consists of heavy-goods vehicles, that goes through the town each day because there is no bypass and no hope of one in the immediate future. In the short term, it seems that there is no money to carry out the work that is required to free the people — particularly the young and elderly — from the health hazards being created by carbon dioxide and the other harmful pollutants that are emitted by the daily-increasing traffic.

The Programme for Government is offering the people of Dungiven no hope for a solution during the lifetime of this mandate and, according to the Minister for Regional Development, they will have to wait for years to get what is rightfully theirs.

Members must acknowledge the injustices and neglect of the past, and begin from there. A decent, modern road from Derry to Belfast is required — one that does not ruin people's health. Professionals have measured and quantified the pollution and have stated that it is ruining the health of local people.

Since December 1997, each local authority in the UK has carried out a review and assessment of air quality in its area. That involves measuring air pollution and trying to predict how it will change in the next few

years. The aim of the review is to ensure that national air-quality objectives are achieved. Therefore, if a local authority finds an area in which the objectives are not likely to be achieved, it must declare it an air-quality management area. It could be an area comprising one or two streets or greater. The local authority will then put together a local air-quality action plan.

The problem for the people of Dungiven and Limavady Borough Council is that they have no control over the causes of the build-up of nitrogen dioxide in the town, particularly at its lower end. The dogs in the street know that the only solution is to take the traffic away from the town centre, where a large number of families, young, not so young and elderly are living.

There are no alternative routes for the traffic that goes through Dungiven. Any changes in traffic management will have little or no impact on the traffic problems in the town. The Department for Regional Development is responsible for the traffic problem, and has known about it for a considerable number of years — long before the current Minister, I concede — and is aware that it has not gone away.

Four years ago, Limavady Borough Council met direct rule Minister, John Spellar, who accepted all the arguments in favour for a bypass for Dungiven and said that the only reason for the delay was — of course — money. He accepted that Dungiven was the only town on the route between Belfast and Derry where pollution problems, congestion problems, parking problems and road-safety difficulties made action imperative.

Motions and references have been made at Limavady Borough Council for 20 — some would say 30 — years. The council agreed that after the Limavady bypass, the Dungiven and Ballykelly bypasses were urgent priorities. When that decision was taken in 2006, the number of vehicles going through the town each day was approximately 14,000 — and, as we all know, that number is rising dramatically. Congestion is bad most of the time, but particularly on Friday afternoons. Pedestrian safety is being compromised by the traffic.

In situations such as this, there is a tendency to blame past failures, which is understandable: some people might say that Willie Ross was MP for the area and was more interested in bypassing Dungiven than actually getting a bypass for the town. Perhaps that is unfair because he is no longer an elected representative.

There were many flamboyant direct rule Ministers, who loved the power and glory of presiding over important events but did precious little to put infrastructure on the ground. In the long years of direct rule, I doubt if any British Minister spent time in Dungiven — maybe someone will correct me.

They may have, but they did not stay long enough to breathe in the nitrogen dioxide or experience the noise of the heavy vehicles.

6.30 pm

In fairness, we got the Toome and Limavady bypasses during the two and a half years of the previous Assembly, and it was assumed that the Dungiven bypass would be next. Given the continuous deterioration of air quality over recent years, it seemed inevitable that the force-feeding of pollution would be brought to a snappy end, but, unfortunately, that has not happened. The old adage, “live horse and you will get grass”, comes to mind.

A report drawn up by consultants in October 2004 made particular reference to noise levels, vibration and poisonous gases in Dungiven. The report stated that noise levels were significantly higher as a direct result of uneven speeds or — I dare suggest — no speed at all. Members may be interested to know that noise nuisance is described by the World Health Organization as:

“a feeling of displeasure evoked by noise.”

Vibration is described as:

“slow frequency disturbance producing physical movements in buildings or occupants.”

Members will not be surprised to hear that all three of those environmental problems — pollution, noise and vibration — are present in Dungiven, and all are offensive to the people who have put up with them day and daily. Those problems must be managed. A bypass, now and not later, is the only way in which that can be done successfully.

Several environmental health reports over the past three years have highlighted Dungiven as having a serious problem with nitrogen dioxide. A special study carried out between July and December 2004 indicated clearly that the risk to health was at an elevated level in Main Street. It is hard to understand why that did not alert the Department for Regional Development to get its finger out and begin serious discussions about funding a bypass. Surely the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Peter Robinson, was aware that there was a special problem in the north-west, which was cutting around eight months off the lives of the residents in at least 317 properties in the town. Let us hope that the Minister for Regional Development was not shafted by the Finance Minister when it comes to the money to build the all-important bypass. There is a growing impatience and a feeling of rejection in Dungiven that its problem has not been taken seriously enough to include the capital cost of the bypass.

As far back as 2003, the then Minister John Spellar MP — clearly under pressure — referred to the Dungiven bypass. He said:

“I want to reflect carefully on the scope for including the Dungiven bypass in the 10-year Forward Planning Schedule for strategic road improvement schemes”.

That is quite a phrase.

That, of course, effectively condemned the people of Dungiven to another decade of forced poisoning. After the dust settled, most people accepted that they had been sold a pup. The Minister went further in his con job by suggesting that the bypass:

“could be achieved by extending slightly the period of the plan to 2014.”

Since then, we have heard various dates mentioned but, sadly, none of them fall within the lifetime of this Assembly. That is regrettable, unacceptable, and grossly unfair, because it is playing with people’s lives.

As I see it, future plans are like pieces of elastic — they can be stretched ever further, but they will snap eventually. The patience of the people of Dungiven is at snapping point. They want action from the Assembly, not promises that can be broken by any future Assembly, and they want it now. They are crying out for the support of the Assembly and are grateful for the cross-community support that the Adjournment debate has attracted. Gregory Campbell has apologised for being unable to attend the debate.

Mr G Robinson: I am pleased to speak in the debate. I have raised the issue of the urgent need for a bypass in Dungiven with the Minister in a question for written answer, I have spoken to community representatives from the town, and I have sought to hasten the process of providing a resolution to the current problems. However, as a fellow member of the Committee for Regional Development and representative for East Londonderry, Mr Dallat and I are aware of the statutory processes that are required before a project of that nature can begin.

I want to see the construction of a bypass begin tomorrow morning. That would alleviate the severe congestion and parking problems in the town and, without doubt, greatly reduce the health consequences to the people of Dungiven. However, everyone understands that quick fixes will not be available or be of any genuine benefit. As a short-term measure, there have been suggestions to divert traffic past Dungiven on to the A37 to ease the problems until the proposed bypass is built.

The Minister for Regional Development will be aware that I have pointed out, on numerous occasions, the problems that exist on the A37 due to the lack of progress on the Gortcorbies climbing lane. A judgement must be made on the benefit of such a diversion or even whether it would be followed by all motorists.

I am fully aware that feelings run high on the issue, and I take this opportunity to inform the Assembly and remind the Minister of the constant pressure that is

being brought to bear on the matter by Limavady Borough Council, which is due to meet the Minister soon. However, I note that the Sinn Féin Member who lives in the area has been so interested in the bypass that he has tabled only one question to his party colleague on the matter since devolution.

The serious traffic pollution in Dungiven has implications for health. A report by the World Health Organization in 2003, entitled 'Health Aspects of Air Pollution with Particulate Matter, Ozone and Nitrogen Dioxide', states that:

"Long-term exposure to current ambient PM concentrations may lead to a marked reduction in life expectancy."

If that does not bring home to us the dangers of the traffic in Dungiven and its resultant air pollution, I do not know what will. Is the Assembly prepared to let the problem continue? I sincerely hope not.

We cannot tolerate a situation in which chest and heart problems have been, are being, and will continue to be, caused by traffic congestion in Dungiven. The health issues carry the most weight with me, and I regard them as the most important reasons for reducing traffic pollution in Dungiven. We cannot tolerate a situation in which people's health has suffered due to the Department for Regional Development's inactivity under previous Administrations. The people wanted, voted for and got their own Government in the shape of this Assembly. Therefore it is up to us, as elected representatives, to do the best that we can. Dungiven needs a bypass — no argument.

I was dismayed that the Minister's written answer to a question that Mr Durkan asked recently showed that that urgently needed project has been pushed back for a further three years. Six months ago, the Minister told me that the project was due to be completed in the latter part of the regional strategic transport network transport plan, which ends in 2015. In his answer to Mr Durkan, he said that it will be delivered in the lifetime of the proposed investment strategy for 2008-18.

The need for a bypass is not in question. If the Minister keeps putting it on the long finger, he will condemn more people to chest and heart problems.

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

Mr G Robinson: I call on the Minister to address the issue.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank my friend and colleague John Dallat for bringing this topic to the House. I assure him that when the internal combustion engine arrives in Kilrea, I will stand shoulder to shoulder with him.

I thank Mr George Robinson for his support. If he had bothered Conor Murphy about the Dungiven bypass as much as I have during the past eight months,

Conor would have hidden under the table when he saw George coming.

I would like to give the House some impression of the frustration experienced by people who live in Dungiven. I have a particular interest in this topic as I am the only person in the Chamber who comes from Dungiven. Two members of my family live very close to the most-affected area in the town — Lower Main Street.

The move to bypass Dungiven began in 1965 under the old Limavady Rural District Council, which George will remember, which, together with the urban council, became Limavady Borough Council. When the council decided that Dungiven should have a bypass there were objections, one of which came from Mr Billy Ross because the bypass would be close to his dwelling. That was an important aspect, although he had good reasons for objecting, as the area was of historic interest. I hope that the issue can be worked out.

Between 1965 and the 1980s there was pressure for a bypass for Dungiven. Some residents disagreed about whether it would be a good thing or not. If we were to ask them now, they would definitely be in favour of a bypass.

In the late 1980s, Paddy O'Loughlin had his house knocked down in preparation for work that was about to begin on the bypass. When, in 2001, I joined George Robinson on Limavady Borough Council, we spoke continually, not only about the bypass but about the general conditions of roads around Limavady. Everyone from that part of the north-west travels to Belfast by way of Dungiven.

Whereas we had been promised a bypass for so many years, a bypass was built at Toome. Toome had what Dungiven had not: a facility for helping congestion, which was used successfully for a good while. The Toome bypass was to be spectacular, with a bridge and all that. I suppose that the direct rule Minister was keen on making spectacular improvements before he went off home again. We all knew that, when it was finished, the Toome bypass would move all the traffic to Dungiven, which would become the next bottleneck. Toome was freed up and Dungiven became totally congested. It was worse than congested, because we had no alternative but to endure traffic travelling up and down Main Street.

A Limavady bypass was also built at that time. George will probably agree with me that it was ill-conceived, because Ballykelly was not bypassed at the same time. Ballykelly is, by a long way, the worst part of the Limavady to Coleraine route. Therefore, the Limavady bypass was not of any great consequence, except that it was a blessing to those who lived in Linenhall Street, which is a narrow street that would

have suffered the same level of pollution as we now suffer in Dungiven.

Soon after devolution, I wrote to Conor Murphy for the first time — in that instance about congestion in Dungiven. I asked that the proposed dualling not have any bearing on whether there should be a bypass at Dungiven; that the bypass be considered a separate project; and that the dualling eventually dovetail the bypass. However, Roads Service and its civil engineers reported that that was not viable.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Brolly, your time is up.

Mr McClarty: I thank Mr John Dallat for securing this important debate. The issue greatly concerns me, as it does all Members who have spoken. For that reason, I regret that Mr Robinson became involved in scoring cheap, party political points: that does this cause no good at all.

Dungiven's requirement for a bypass is now critical. As has been mentioned on a number of occasions, the volume of traffic through the town is extremely worrying. It has resulted in Dungiven's becoming perhaps the most polluted town in the Province — an unwanted title.

It is completely unacceptable, in this day and age, that the people of that County Londonderry town should be forced to put up with dangerously high levels of pollution, as a result of vehicle emissions. The health risks are immense.

In a recent study, Limavady Borough Council's environmental health department recorded pollution levels in Main Street in Dungiven at 68 micrograms per cubic metre of nitrogen dioxide. Since monitoring began in 2006, the average level has risen to 50 micrograms per cubic metre. Experts in the field advise that a reading of 40 is "hazardous". Therefore, how much worse is a reading of 68? The situation is extremely worrying. The Assembly cannot continue to tolerate the fact that people live and work in a town in this Province that is an unsafe and unhealthy environment for them.

As recently as last month, the Minister for Regional Development corresponded with Limavady Borough Council, when he announced the next stage of the upgrade of the A6 road from Londonderry to Dungiven, including the Dungiven bypass. Civil engineers have been appointed to examine options to enable a preferred route to be selected.

The route corridor for the scheme has already been selected. Consultants are examining a variety of options in that corridor, and they plan to consult on them before summer 2008. After further detailed appraisal, the Department plans to announce the preferred route for the new dual carriageway in the spring of 2009.

Although I welcome those moves to tackle the matter, the people of Dungiven should not have to endure the dangerous threat of traffic pollution for another year.

6.45 pm

Immediate action is needed to deal with this problem. The issue cannot be put on the long finger; it must be acted on immediately, and not at some notional date in the future. During the course of the previous Assembly, a bypass was provided for Limavady. That was greatly needed, and it was hoped that one would be provided for Dungiven in due course. Unfortunately, that did not happen, but the talking and the pondering continued.

The time for talking is over. Years have been wasted on deliberations and debate on this issue. Now that devolution has been restored to Northern Ireland, a functioning Executive can and should tackle such problems head on. I urge the Minister to act now to ensure that the people of Dungiven and the surrounding area do not have to endure such an unacceptable situation for much longer.

Mrs M Bradley: Last Friday, I attended a meeting in Derry at which two of my colleagues, Mr Brolly and Mr McClarty, were also present. The first question that we were asked was from a community activist from the Dungiven area about the bypass, and when it was happening. The community activist highlighted the fact that the people of Dungiven have great concerns about the pollution in the area, which is affecting people's health. I ask the Minister how people can be expected to live with such a problem on a daily basis, perhaps for another seven years, particularly as the pollution is well above safety levels.

It is not only people in Dungiven who would welcome a bypass; the whole of the north-west awaits the day when that happens. As a Member who drives through that town every day, I see the problems that people face. They cannot open their windows. When I went into a shop one day, a lady took time to tell me about her problems — she cannot keep the front of her shop clean. The people of Dungiven cannot keep their homes clean. It is most unfair that those people live in such a beautiful small town, yet they live with pollution that is above safety levels. During Question Time on 25 February 2008, I asked the Minister to expedite progress on this matter. I was told that he could not do that, but I ask him to, please, find some way of finding the finances to give the people of Dungiven what they deserve — a bypass by their town.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank John Dallat for bringing the debate before the House. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the issue of traffic pollution and the situation in Dungiven in particular. I have asked my officials to take note of

the Hansard report so that if any points are not picked up, we can write to Members after the debate.

I can appreciate the frustration that Members have expressed about the length of time and the added pressure of the pollution factor. I appreciate that there is frustration in a great many places across the North. I speak as someone who has experienced frustration over the years while waiting for bypasses in my own part of the world. I fully accept that there is an added issue in Dungiven.

This is not an issue of money, as some Members, including John Dallat, suggested. I wish that more work had been done under the direct rule and devolved Administrations before I took office, so that it would be at a more advanced stage than it is now. When planning a major road scheme such as a bypass, one must go through a series of processes. If those processes are not followed, one might end up in court in a judicial review.

Sufficient time must be spent on examining the route options and narrowing down to a specific preferred option. Such a project would affect hundreds of landowners from Derry right through to the Dungiven area. Those people must be given the opportunity to comment on that and try to seek some means of offsetting the impact that a major road project would have on their land. If proper procurement procedures were not followed, the Department might end up in front of the Public Accounts Committee — of which Mr Dallat is a member — to answer for that.

Those processes take a frustratingly long time. As I said, I appreciate that people have been frustrated by waiting for a bypass. I also appreciate that there is an added fear factor because of the pollution in the town.

Francie Brolly, George Robinson, Mary Bradley and others have raised the issue with me, and I am conscious of the urgency around it. However, demands for immediate action or fast-tracking are simply not possible, as there are certain procedures that must be followed. If I had come into office when all the statutory procedures had been followed and the route options and procurement had been completed, I could announce that work on the bypass could begin. However, I have come in at the beginning of a lengthy but necessary process, and that is frustrating. Therefore, I share some of the frustration that people feel.

I accept that traffic pollution is a real problem. No one can underestimate the scale of the challenge for all of us as we deal with pollution and with the related threat of climate change. Congestion has a negative impact on our towns and cities, both environmentally and economically, and those points were made during the debate. Congestion slows down business, causes annoyance and frustration to drivers and pedestrians and affects the air quality of those who live and work

in towns and cities everywhere. Therefore, we are investing in public transport and introducing measures to manage our road network more effectively to improve traffic flows. However, even as we do that, congestion is set to grow with increasing demands for travel. We face the real threat of increased congestion in the future if we do not invest sufficiently in effective measures now.

Turning to traffic pollution in Dungiven, a statutory framework for improving air quality has been firmly established under the 2002 Environment Order, which provides a statutory framework within which air quality is managed by district councils in the North. The framework requires district councils to review and assess a range of air pollutants against the objectives set out in the UK air quality strategy, using a range of monitoring and modelling observations and corresponding analysis. Councils are required to declare locations where objectives are not met as air quality management areas and to develop action plans to ensure that the necessary improvements are delivered within an appropriate timescale.

Relevant stakeholders, such as my Department's Roads Service, have a responsibility to contribute to any action plan relating to areas over which we have control or influence. I appreciate John Dallat's point about councils not having complete responsibility for contributing to an action plan, but other agencies with such a responsibility have an obligation to contribute to those plans.

Nitrogen dioxide is predominantly a traffic-related pollutant, with emissions generally highest in urban areas. Levels can vary significantly throughout the day, with peaks generally occurring twice daily as a consequence of rush-hour traffic. The contribution of road traffic to nitrogen dioxide has declined significantly in recent years due to the introduction of tighter vehicle emission standards. Further reductions are expected to be achieved in the future as vehicle technology improves.

Following a detailed review and assessment of air quality in its area of responsibility, Limavady Borough Council has declared a section of Dungiven Main Street between the River Roe and numbers 89 to 106 Main Street an air quality management area for nitrogen dioxide. As required under the legislation, an air quality action plan has been prepared by the council and other relevant authorities. Roads Service has had input into that action plan, which was submitted to the Department of the Environment for appraisal during September 2007.

In developing the action plan, Limavady Borough Council held consultations with Roads Service and various traffic management options were considered, such as traffic calming, traffic signals, one-way systems and traffic regulations. Initial considerations

suggest that, for several reasons, the location does not readily lend itself to developing traffic management measures as potential solutions to air-quality issues. When the plan is finally accepted, the Department of the Environment will monitor progress on the achievement of actions identified in Limavady Borough Council's action plan to ensure that the necessary air-quality improvements are achieved.

Roads Service places a high priority on upgrading the north-west key transport corridor, which includes the proposed bypass. The construction of a bypass around Dungiven would be expected to improve air quality in the town, although local traffic would continue to use Main Street. On 3 July 2007, I announced the next stage of the process for procurement of the A6 Derry to Dungiven dual carriageway. The study of alternative routes will be carried out to examine the scheme options, which, in turn, will enable selection of the preferred route.

Several options will be considered, and one preferred route will be selected. That route will be announced in 2009. Development of the scheme will include a comprehensive consultation process. A timescale for a bypass is very much dependent on the progress of the overall A6 dualling scheme from Dungiven to Derry. As with all major road schemes, the timing of the construction will depend on the availability of finance. Roads Service intends to take the complete scheme through all the statutory processes as an entity, although Francie Brolly made the point that this is a single scheme, and I accept that.

Members have suggested that the scheme be taken in stages, with the Dungiven bypass advanced as an early part of that scheme, and I will discuss that with the Roads Service. When I came to office, I inherited the process as a single scheme that was to be taken forward as an entity before commencing the procurement cycle, and that will, unfortunately, be time-consuming.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, I have been in Dungiven and driven through it many times. I appreciate the frustration of the community and of those who travel from Derry to Belfast and vice versa daily. I assure the House that this scheme will not be put on the long finger. I will continue to try to examine ways of achieving the project in the shortest possible time frame, not only for the sake of road users and the journey time from Derry to Belfast, but, more importantly, for the people who live on Main Street in Dungiven and who have to put up with the unacceptable levels of pollution. It is a priority for my Department to deal with that, and to do so in the shortest possible time. Go raibh maith agat.

Adjourned at 6.56 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 4 March 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Standing Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: Members, I have received correspondence from the nominating officer of the Democratic Unionist Party, the Rt Hon Dr Paisley, nominating Mr James Spratt as the Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. Mr Spratt has accepted the appointment. I am satisfied that that correspondence meets the requirements of Standing Orders, and I therefore confirm that Mr James Spratt is Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill

Second Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): Before I move the motion, I would like to say that given that my duties require my presence in the House today, I am prevented from attending the funeral of the brother of my friend and colleague Dr William McCrea. I would like to record my condolences to William and Ian and the family circle, and I am sure that I express the sympathy of the whole House.

I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07) be agreed.

The Bill proposes several significant amendments to the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 1979, which is the primary legislation that governs the health, safety, welfare and convenience of people in or around buildings in Northern Ireland. That legislation was last amended in 1990, so it is in need of some updating.

The proposed amendments acknowledge modern building methods and developments in the construction industry, and they align us more closely with recent changes elsewhere in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. Over the past few years there has been a marked increase in awareness of environmental issues, placing greater emphasis on matters such as sustainability and the environment.

Indeed, this Assembly has recognised the importance of sustainability and the environment in its Programme for Government, and the House has debated these matters. Indications are that further EU directives on these themes will emerge. I am therefore proposing to expand the general principles of building regulations to include protection and enhancement of the environment and the promotion of sustainable development. Furthermore, I wish to extend and clarify the list of matters on which building regulations may be made to include, for example, low- or zero-carbon systems, sustainable use of water, recycling and security of buildings.

I am also keen that we move away from what are known as “deemed to satisfy” provisions towards a guidance-based system. As they stand, the building regulations in Northern Ireland identify a reasonable standard that must be attained. They refer to “deemed to satisfy” provisions in technical booklets that set the benchmark for compliance with those standards. Adherence to the “deemed to satisfy” provisions guarantees compliance with the requirements of the regulations. However, it is possible to satisfy the requirements using different methods. Legislative authorities elsewhere in the British Isles use a system

of practical guidance which is taken into consideration when determining whether the requirements of the regulations have been met. However, as with our provisions, there is no obligation to follow the guidance.

The merits of moving from “deemed to satisfy” to a guidance-based system are several. The latter will encourage designers towards a more creative and flexible approach. Designers can move away from the potentially restrictive, guaranteed “deemed to satisfy” solution and base their plans on the rationale behind the provision, which will be clarified in the guidance documents. This approach also recognises the growing practice of providing guidance where a “deemed to satisfy” solution is not available, and the need to do so. In addition, a guidance-based system will facilitate closer and more rapid technical harmonisation with other legislative authorities, thus improving consistency across the UK regions. It will also relax some of the more onerous legislative requirements associated with the current rules. I am also proposing to introduce provisions relating to the preparation and review of guidance documents, including public consultation.

Under a further measure, district councils will formally be required to have regard to the special characteristics of protected buildings and buildings in conservation areas. They will have to ensure, when applying the requirements of the building regulations, that care is taken, as far as is practicable, to ensure that any special characteristics of the buildings are not compromised. This amendment will formalise current practice.

It is also my intention to give district councils the power to type-approve buildings, in recognition of the growing practice of constructing the same type of building in several district council areas. For example, this will allow a developer to submit plans for a particular house design, obtain type approval from one district council, and use that certification to build the same house in another council area. The matters for which type approval may be sought will be set out in the regulations. The district council responsible for the area in which the building is to be erected will have to ensure that it is constructed in accordance with the type-approved drawings. That council will also approve those elements of the design that are specific to the site — for example, with respect to local soil and weather conditions.

The levying of fees, and administrative provisions connected with these functions, will be prescribed in amendments to the subordinate legislation. Applicants will have the right to appeal to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) if a district council refuses to grant a type approval.

Article 12 of the 1979 Order will be commenced. This will give district councils the power to require reasonable tests in order to confirm that there is no contravention of the regulations. However, I am

proposing an amendment to enable the types of test to be laid out by the Department in regulations. The prescription of such tests removes the need to amend the primary legislation, thereby allowing the introduction of additional tests that may be required in the future.

I want to amend the period within which a district council may issue a final contravention notice. This will set a longstop of 12 months from the date when the council is notified of the completion of the works. That is in line with the defect liability period in normal building contracts.

Further, I propose to make it mandatory, through supporting regulations, for an applicant to notify district councils when the work has been completed and for the district councils to issue completion certificates once they are satisfied that the work meets the requirements of the regulations.

The Bill proposes to repeal a provision that had not been commenced and which would have allowed for a breach of the building regulations to be actionable where damage has been caused. The Department received no representations to activate the provision. However, in light of comments received at Executive stage that the provision could encourage compliance, I propose to introduce an amendment during the passage of the Bill to remove that repeal. I have asked officials to investigate how the provision may be modernised to better suit building regulations practice.

I intend to make it an offence for someone to knowingly or recklessly submit false or misleading information for the purposes of obtaining building control approval. At present, district councils have to rely on common law principles to remedy such matters, which can be a lengthy and expensive process.

The Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 1979 requires the Department to consult with bodies rather than individuals when making appointments to the Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC). I am seeking an amendment to comply with the Nolan principles for public appointments, which require the Department to adhere to the code of practice of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland. The code of practice recommends that nominations to public bodies such as the NIBRAC must come from suitable persons who meet the applications criteria, including representative bodies or associations.

Most district councils already maintain registers of information about applications for building regulations approval. However, the type of information held is not consistent across all councils. Therefore, I have included provisions that will require district councils to keep a register of particular information relating to each application for building control approval, including details of progress and outcomes. District councils will

be required to make the registers available for public inspection. The actual format of the registers, including details of the information to be recorded, will be prescribed in the supporting regulations.

Finally, I propose to bind the Crown to the substantive requirements of the building regulations: by that I mean the technical requirements relating to design and construction and the provision of services and fittings as distinct from the procedural or administrative requirements. I also propose to redefine a Crown building as a building, or part thereof, that is “occupied by the Crown” rather than one in which there is a “Crown interest”, and to clearly define exempted buildings or bodies in regulation. Exemptions would be based on the need to preserve the safety and security of the building or people in or around the building.

The Bill therefore presents a number of improvements relating to amendment of the existing legislative framework and additional powers. It expands the general principles of building regulations to allow them to address a wider range of environmental issues. Adopting the guidance-based system will provide the mechanism for setting technical requirements that are more consistent and responsive, and that should be to the benefit of the construction industry.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Storey): I thank the Minister for explaining the general principles of the Bill to the House this morning. I welcome the opportunity to debate the matter.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel received an oral and written briefing from departmental officials on the background to the Bill on 7 November 2007. The Committee is aware that the Bill has two main objectives: to define the powers, duties and rights of the Department, and the district councils that enforce the regulations and applications; and to extend the general principles in the existing primary legislation to include protection of the environment and the promotion of sustainable development.

Committee members were briefed on a range of issues including the outcome of the consultations undertaken by the Department from January to May 2004 and from July to November 2005. In addition, a number of stakeholder workshops were held with representatives of the building control function in the district councils and representatives of the construction industry.

10.45 am

Members were also briefed on the key provisions of the Bill, which include: provision to extend the general provision of building regulations to include the protection and enhancement of the environment and the promotion of sustainable development in line with similar amendments to the corresponding legislation in England, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland; provision

to enable building regulations to cover areas such as the security of buildings, sustainable use and management of water, the use, reuse and recycling of materials, and the inclusion of low- or zero-carbon systems for the purpose of reducing greenhouse gas emissions; provision for a new criminal offence of making false or misleading statements to building control; provisions that require local councils to keep a register that records applications for building control approval and to consider the special requirements of listed buildings and buildings in conservation areas when building control applications are being considered; technical changes that involve a shift from a “deemed-to-satisfy” system to a guidance-based system; and provisions for granting additional powers to district councils in approving superstructures and insuring conformity with building regulations.

Committee members raised a number of issues with departmental officials at the briefing session, which included: potential problems relating to contravention notices in trying to establish the date of completion of work; the potential burden on ratepayers resulting from additional duties for district councils; and the potential implications from differences in the approaches taken by district councils in exercising their powers relating to types of approvals.

The Department of Finance and Personnel also updated the Committee on some of the ongoing issues that were subject to further discussions relating to dangerous buildings, demolitions and extending the time limit of the appeals process. The Committee was satisfied with the briefing and clarification provided by the Department, and members will engage with departmental officials and other stakeholders on the details of the provisions of the Bill during the forthcoming Committee Stage.

Finally, I wish to highlight the related issue of the use of renewable energy sources in buildings, which is relevant because of the increased focus that the Bill places on the protection of the environment and the promotion of sustainable development. The Committee is mindful of the ongoing debate over mandatory microgeneration and is due to receive evidence on that issue shortly. The Committee will, therefore, wish to consider the various approaches involved and carefully weigh up all the arguments before taking a position on how the matter should be progressed. In the meantime, I support the principle of the Bill and the motion.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Second Stage of the Bill. Its new powers and amended provisions illustrate the increasing significance of sustainability and environmental issues, as outlined in the sustainable development strategy.

Several public consultations were held on the amendments and provisions, during which all stakeholders had an opportunity to give their views. A number of amendments are particularly welcome, including the provision for the Department of Finance and Personnel to regulate the energy performance of buildings and the power to decide what proportion of energy comes from a particular energy source.

The Bill gives district councils some powers, including the right to ensure that builders adhere to preserving the character of protected buildings when they carry out their functions under building regulations.

There is a welcome new requirement that district councils keep registers of information for public inspection. Given the new procurement practices in public buildings, with projects such as Workplace 2010, what constitutes public buildings has been redefined, and they also come under building regulations when work is being carried out.

The scope of building regulations is extended to include the protection and enhancement of the environment and the promotion of sustainable development. Although there is another debate to be had on the issues of sustainable development and renewable energy, measures to deliver sustainable energy homes have not thus far provided the sea change required to move towards carbon targets and homes that can cope with current oil and gas price increases.

A short-sighted building policy will cost the economy more in the longer term as it will miss the targets for the reduction of carbon emissions and incur EU fines. Once again the fuel poor will suffer most.

Sinn Féin broadly welcomes the measures outlined and in particular the fact that any future amendments to the legislation will be subjected to an equality impact assessment screening. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Beggs: First, I declare an interest as Carrickfergus Borough Council's representative on the north eastern building control committee, which has some influence in the exercise of building control regulations.

I too give a general welcome to the proposals contained in the Bill with regard to increasing the sustainability of buildings. Those proposals bring the Northern Ireland legislation largely into line with that in Scotland, England, Wales and the Republic of Ireland. There are some relatively new proposals that will widen the scope of building regulations in the future. Those include the security of buildings, the detailed sustainability, the management of waste and the reuse and recycling of building materials.

The proposed legislation will make it an offence to provide deliberately either misleading or false information, as to do so could put people's lives at risk. There are other shortcuts that can be used to reduce building

costs, and it is important that designers and builders appreciate the seriousness of inappropriate action.

There is also a requirement for councils to keep records, which I found somewhat surprising — I would have thought that most councils already keep records — but if it improves the methods that are used to maintain records, it is to be welcomed.

It is essential that we all take action to reduce our carbon footprint. Given that a significant amount of energy is utilised in homes and other buildings, there needs to be greater scrutiny and regulation of building design.

Potentially, microgeneration is an area of contention. In July 2006, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Hain, announced that he would change the legislation to make microgeneration mandatory for all new builds from April 2008. The question is whether that is the best way of reducing energy consumption. There are serious doubts about that. In November 2007, I attended a Northern Ireland building control conference in Fermanagh. It was clear from talking to many of those present that there was a degree of scepticism about some of the ideas being floated, such as bolting a small windmill to the gable of a house. I understand that very few have been sold in Northern Ireland because they are just not practical.

The Construction Employers Federation (CEF) has indicated that in order to achieve lower carbon emissions in new homes:

“it is more cost effective to invest in the energy efficiency of the building including high insulation and airtightness rather than through micro-generation.”

We must get the basics right, and it would be wrong to give a message to the industry not to concentrate on the basics but to focus on microgeneration. Microgeneration may become the sustainable way forward once the quality of buildings has improved substantially. At present, that is not the case.

In its press release, the federation noted that:

“initial indications are that the efficiency of a range of micro-generation technologies under trial was generally low. There were also practical issues such as potential for structural damage to brickwork and noise problems from wall mounted turbines.”

While those ideas may produce some wonderful visual images of houses with small windmills bolted to the gable walls, in reality they also create some practical problems that would have to be overcome.

There are, however, other methods of micro-generation that are feasible and much more practical and that are being driven by the private sector.

I noted in particular that, in many instances, the private sector installs solar heating, which is one of the more efficient and proven technologies.

Mr F McCann: With regard to the points raised by the Member, I heard an interesting news item concerning Antrim Area Hospital, where a wind turbine saved over £150,000 over a year, and electricity could be sold on to the grid. Should not most Government buildings follow that pattern in the provision of energy?

Mr Beggs: That turbine is large — 600-800 kilowatts. It is important that there is a balance between production and use of energy. Hospitals have a 24-hour energy requirement. Regrettably, however, many homes have a low daytime energy requirement, and are not in an efficient position to generate electricity.

I agree with the Member that Government must, in general, look to being more self-sustainable in their use of energy, and I expect that, over the next few years, the Northern Ireland Civil Service must examine the issue in respect of its entire estate. A sustainable and lower-carbon method must be found to heat buildings and sustain the work carried out in them.

Returning to microgeneration, a couple of issues are in danger of being linked. Last week I attended a meeting of the Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Association in the Long Gallery. Its members were critical of the decision to remove the statutory requirement; however, they were even more sore over the decision not to renew the Reconnect programme at the moment. That grant-based system was there to encourage the private sector to move into microregeneration, and that issue should not be linked to the issue we now debate. The matter of providing grants to encourage the private sector to move into microregeneration is a separate, live, issue, which should be discussed and considered by another Department.

Given the rapid increase in fuel prices, it is important for our future that we sustain the industry, because this kind of technology reduces our energy use and contributes to a reduction in fuel poverty. On that issue, I welcome the announcement by the Minister for Social Development that she intends to introduce sustainable technology into newbuild housing.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Member accept that, although it is important that we make homes as energy efficient as possible, it is important to balance that with the need to ensure that the cost of building new homes is not so extravagant that it prevents many people from being able to buy them? Is he concerned that some major builders say that, were the full range of suggested measures to be implemented, a new home could cost an additional £45,000?

Mr Beggs: There must be a balance in this, as in everything else, particularly in regulations. Too often we look at the short term, at immediate prices. We must examine the long-term costs of running homes and buildings, because it might well be more efficient to increase insulation beyond mandatory levels. We

must not be driven by basics or by what attracts first-time buyers. Good practice must be promoted and encouraged. If it were left to builders, the cheapest possible houses would be built, and we would be unable to meet our carbon-reduction targets.

11.00 am

Nor would that provide for the future, given that energy is already very expensive and may become even more so. Therefore, it is important that we encourage gradually the continual upgrading of the standard of homes in Northern Ireland, and that should properly be done through building regulations and good practice. However, a great deal of education is needed for people in the building sector so that those such as architects and builders become better informed and include energy efficiency measures at an early design stage in order that costs may be kept down. There is a balance to be struck, but it would be wrong to allow the building sector to be the sole driver of the issue.

In making his announcement about curtailing micro-generation, the Minister said that he will consider over the next couple of years whether there is a need to further increase the building regulations, thus adding to the recent significant increases.

The new type approval was discussed earlier, and certainly, if someone has made detailed calculations and gained approval from a building control officer or department in one council area, I can see some logic in their questioning why they would have to go through a similar process in a neighbouring area. However, it must be ensured that there is good communication between all building control officers so that similarly high standards are applied throughout Northern Ireland. We want to avoid the situation whereby the lesser standards to which one particular council area agrees become the new standard for approvals in Northern Ireland. Hence, it is important that there is an overarching standard for planning approvals. That can be achieved through close communication between the building control sections in the different council areas of Northern Ireland.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel is just starting its scrutiny of the Bill. That will provide an opportunity for representatives of the industry, as well as environmentalists, to give evidence in writing or by other means. It is important that the issue is discussed thoroughly, and I hope that those who are passionate about it will make representations to the Committee. It is also important that the Committee is well informed, that the issues are aired and, if necessary, amendments are considered and agreed to. That is our role as a legislative Assembly, and I hope that the public and the industry will take up that opportunity.

I am generally content with the provisions of the Bill; however, I hope to hear the views of others to determine whether improvements to it can be made.

Mr O'Loan: In general, I support the principles of the Bill. It includes several clauses that deal with different matters, and I broadly support them all.

I want to discuss sustainability in particular; it is a key issue and the one with which the public will most engage. Climate change is a vital issue for us all. The fact that the climate is changing is no longer questioned, and there is very little debate about whether that change has been induced by humans. That creates a big responsibility for us all, given that the issue in question is nothing less than the sustainability of the planet. Looking globally, when one considers poverty and development issues, a moral dimension is brought into any discussion of climate change and the policy response to it. That added dimension means that the issue must be taken very seriously.

The SDLP takes climate change very seriously, and our manifesto contains several commitments on the matter.

We referred to introducing stronger targets and policies to meet international obligations on climate change and to promoting renewable energy sources, including wind power, tidal power and biomass. We also referred to the need to create a renewable energy plan for Northern Ireland. The entire issue needs to be seen in the round, of which this Bill is one part.

We mentioned the need to encourage micro-generation from renewable sources by providing financial incentives and talked about encouraging higher energy efficiency and the integration of micro-renewables in new and existing buildings — the very theme being discussed today.

I have long felt that there is scope for the building regulations to contribute more in this area. We have not met the best international standards, which relate to energy savings through insulation and more efficient heating systems. That is not the focus of this Bill, but they are extremely important in themselves, and measures have been taken in relation to those. Another aspect of building regulations is the move to renewables as low or zero-carbon sources of energy.

Mr Beggs referred to the Construction Employers Federation's view that choice should not be at the expense of homeowners. It feels that the decision to use microgeneration should be made by the developer; it should not be made mandatory. The Construction Employers Federation believes that much of the renewable technology at micro level is not yet proven. Existing research done by the industry, in conjunction with the universities, needs to work its way through. The federation feels that it is better to let building

regulations set the energy efficiency targets and to let the industry work out how to meet those.

That is one view, and it certainly should be listened to, but it is not the only view. There is a strong argument that, without microgeneration, we simply cannot achieve the carbon targets that have been set. Payback time is certainly one issue, but achieving the targets is another, and it may become the dominant issue.

Measures may be required that will be at the expense of developers and, ultimately, homeowners, but the reality of this issue needs to be recognised. We are talking about payback times, and those technologies will pay back. There is an argument that the more those technologies are put in place, the more they will be the subject of research and development in order to make them more efficient and more cost effective.

The Bill creates the right to make regulations, but it does not make the regulations. There is further scope for consultation on what particular regulations should be put in place, and further discretion around the timing of when those regulations should be brought in. As the Bill goes through Committee Stage, there will be the opportunity to listen to further views, and for the Committee to give consideration to those. In principle, however, the measures — particularly this sustainability measure — are sound.

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party broadly supports the Bill. I note that neighbouring jurisdictions have already updated their legislation, so it is only right that Northern Ireland should do so too. We recognise that this legislation is based on several rounds of consultation with key stakeholders, which, I am sure, will continue throughout the Committee Stage.

There is plenty to welcome in the Bill, and we have only a few concerns. The Alliance Party welcomes the greater potential for the consideration of environmental and sustainability issues, and we note the enabling powers to make regulations regarding reused and recycled materials and energy efficiency. There may be a challenge as how to use those powers, but that is a challenge for the future.

We are concerned about the Finance Minister's recent backtracking on renewable energy grants, which is not very encouraging. The argument is that there is a need to protect the flexibility of designers and developers. It is hard to reconcile that statement with this legislation.

Like others, the Alliance Party is concerned at the absence of a reference to microgeneration in the long list of energy technologies in the Bill. However, there is plenty to welcome, such as the commitment to protected buildings. There is great concern in the community at the regular loss of valuable buildings to developers, and we are certain that greater use should be made of existing structures through renovations.

The Alliance Party has some concerns about the proposal for type-approvals. We are worried that approval for a type of development in one area will bind the building approval process in other areas in relation to such developments. There is a need for safeguards in that respect, but we look forward to further details as the Bill progresses.

We note the change of emphasis from the “deemed-to-satisfy” provision to a guidance-based system, and the new offence of knowingly or recklessly supplying information to circumvent regulations. I wonder why that offence was not always included, but it is good to see it now.

I also note and welcome the Minister’s reference to buildings being occupied by the Crown as opposed to being owned by the Crown.

I apologise on behalf of Dr Farry who should have been in the Chamber to speak in the debate. The Alliance Party supports the Second Stage of the Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill, and I look forward to hearing more from the Minister in due course.

Mr S Wilson: Just on that point —

Mr Lunn: Which point?

Mr S Wilson: Does the Member find it odd that the Green Party Member is absent from the Chamber for the debate? Does he agree that one would have expected the Green Party representative to have rushed through the door to show his support for the measures being debated?

Mr McNarry: Sammy Wilson is the Green Party’s man of the year.

Mr S Wilson: I have to speak up for the Green Party now.

Mr Lunn: Sammy Wilson may well have to speak up for the Green Party; I do not. I understand that Brian Wilson and Dr Farry have important business to attend to in North Down this morning. I am sure that the Member will sympathise with that; one cannot be everywhere. I am a poor substitute for Dr Farry, not for the Green Party.

Mr P Robinson: The Member for East Antrim should hand back the award that he recently received to the Green Party in protest at its Member’s absence from this morning’s useful debate. It is a dry subject, and I know that the people in the Gallery were not sitting on the edge of their seats waiting for the next word to be uttered. However, in practical terms, the Bill is important. Members — particularly those of us who have been through district councils — will be aware of the importance of the building control functions.

I will do my best to respond to as many of the issues that I picked out during Members’ speeches. I hope that Members will appreciate that if I do not address

all concerns now, I will scan the Hansard report and respond to any that I missed.

I thank the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. I note that the Chairperson is not with us; he must have had a good time in Dublin, and the Dublin hangover must have lasted a bit longer than was expected. I thank the Committee for its support in looking at the issues relating to the Bill, and we will be happy to work with them during the further stages of the Bill.

Mr Storey mentioned microgeneration — an issue that was touched on by a number of Members during the progression of the Bill. The value of microgeneration to the construction industry is still in its early stages. Let me be clear: there is no question of my having done an about-turn on microgeneration, and I have noted that in papers on several occasions. I did not introduce the mandatory requirement for micro-generation in the first instance; I suspect that it was a hobby horse that was being ridden by a former Minister.

It is not the right time to make microgeneration compulsory, because the technology is not sufficiently advanced or the costs sufficiently low for us to make it mandatory. Some people say that it would put a heavy burden on the construction industry and that builders can afford it, but I assure the House that the builders would not carry the burden; they would pass it on. Mandatory microgeneration, therefore, would lead to higher house prices.

The power to regulate performance standards in making microgeneration systems mandatory may well be exercised in the future.

That will depend very much on the industry and on the costs attached to it. However, I am content that setting challenging emission targets for new buildings is the best approach to adopt at the moment.

11.15 am

I welcome Mr Beggs’ remarks. By and large, he was right about the issue. There is scope for architects and builders to adopt a flexible approach that enables them to incorporate cost-effective energy efficiency measures, such as higher standards of thermal installation or renewable technologies — or a combination of both — should they wish to achieve the emission targets.

Mr Fra McCann must be an early riser, because he referred to an item about Antrim Area Hospital on this morning’s ‘Good Morning Ulster’. I also heard that item and thought that it was interesting. The hospital installed a wind turbine and reduced its costs by around £150,000. It also contributed towards its income by a further £50,000 by selling power back to the grid. I cannot remember the exact size of the wind turbine, but I think that it was between 130 ft and 140 ft high. Such a wind turbine could not be installed on every

house in Northern Ireland nor on every Government building, as was suggested. There is value in wind turbines, and Government buildings could consider using that kind of energy in specific circumstances, but I am not sure whether a wind turbine should be installed on top of Parliament Buildings. However, it has been suggested that a wind turbine could be installed in the Chamber as we could generate enough power to light up the whole of Belfast.

Mr F McCann: Especially if Sammy is in the Chamber.

Mr P Robinson: I do not think that he would be the lone contributor to such power.

Declan O'Loan raised matters about zero-carbon systems. There is nothing to prevent builders from incorporating low- or zero-carbon systems into new or existing buildings. In fact, the amendment to the building regulations made in November 2006 sets targets that should reduce emissions to 40% below previous levels. Therefore, there is some flexibility in the system. I have asked officials to progress another amendment to reduce emissions from new buildings by a further 25%.

The Member for North Antrim Mr Storey, who was acting in his role as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, dealt with issues relating to the serving of contravention notices. Building control officers will remain empowered to serve contravention notices when work is ongoing; they have up to 18 months after completion of the work in which to do so. We propose to retain the right to serve contravention notices at any stage during the construction process and to amend the period within which building control officers may issue such a notice — setting a longstop of 12 months from the date that the district council receives notification of the completion of the building. That period is in line with the defects liability period in normal building contracts.

Mr Beggs and my colleague Mr Storey raised the issue about some councils not holding registers, but I think that they all hold them. The requirement in the Bill will ensure that there is some conformity about the information that councils hold on their registers. At least that will provide a default position so that councils can fulfil a basic requirement on the registers.

Mr Storey also raised an issue about type approvals. District councils will have to consult with other affected district councils on type approvals. That touches on a matter that was also raised by Mr Beggs, who was concerned that we might end up with a lower standard of approval in some areas. When a type approval is being sought, the applicant will be required to indicate which council area from which they wish to seek approval. Therefore, there would then be contact between those two areas.

There are also matters, such as fees and fee sharing, that it will be necessary to deal with using subordinate legislation, and, at the appropriate time, I will be happy to work with the Committee to address those matters.

The Member for West Belfast Jennifer McCann spoke about new zero-carbon buildings, which I touched on; however, I wish to stress that building regulations apply to new buildings, which comprise only about 2% of the total stock, and, therefore, we should not get carried away too much.

I have dealt with the issues raised by Mr Beggs.

Mr Lunn gave the impression that he was suggesting that the Minister was backtracking on renewable-energy grants. I assume that he was referring to the Reconnect grant scheme, which was a direct rule proposal and is due to end in March. That is a matter for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), and it is not the responsibility of the Department of Finance and Personnel. Coincidentally, last Friday, in my constituency advice centre, a constituent expressed concern about that matter and the hope that consideration might be given to extending that scheme for a further period. Therefore, in my capacity as a constituency MP, I wrote to the appropriate Minister to ascertain whether that matter has been assessed. Mr Speaker, I trust that that was a deft piece of buck passing. That matter is not my responsibility, and I would not wish to step onto anyone else's territory.

I thank Members for contributing to the debate, and, because of the subject matter, I was surprised that so many people took part. The debate was good, and several important matters were addressed. I am satisfied that when the amendments are enacted, the building regulations regulatory framework will be stronger and more effective. Such regulations are in everybody's interests because they help to ensure our health, safety, welfare and convenience in and around buildings, as well as contributing to the important goal of saving fuel and power.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill (NIA 11/07) be agreed.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Second Stage of the Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill [NIA 11/07]. The Bill stands referred to the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

Public Health (Amendment) Bill

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that the Consideration Stage is intended to enable the Assembly to debate any amendments to the Bill. As no amendments have been tabled, there will be no opportunity to discuss the Public Health (Amendment) Bill [NIA 8/07] today. Of course, Members will have the opportunity to fully debate the Bill at the Final Stage. Therefore, by leave of the Assembly, I propose to group the Bill's two clauses for the Question on stand part, followed by the Question on the long title.

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

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Public Health (Amendment) Bill [NIA 8/07]. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Education that she wishes to make a statement about the structure to set in train an area-based look at provision in the post-primary phase.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat. On 4 December 2007, I set out my vision for the future structure for education in the North.

Ó shin, bhuail mé le hoideachasóirí, múinteoirí, ceardchumann agus, go háirithe, le tuismitheoirí agus daoine óga a thuigeann go bhfuil níos mó i gceist sa phacáiste leasuithe atá beartaithe ná aistriú go hiarbhunscoileanna.

Since then, I have met educationalists, teachers, trade unions and, most importantly, parents and young people, who have not simply reduced the proposed reform package to the issue of transfer to post-primary schools. There is much more to what we propose than the important question of transfer. I have set out the need for new transfer arrangements within a much wider, progressive reform agenda, embracing demographic decline and the delivery of a new, expanded curriculum.

Effective area-based plans are central to that and need to be drawn up. Area-based planning has found broad support across the education spectrum. We need to quickly press ahead with this agenda in order to plan and deliver the curriculum to all young people, be they rural- or urban-based, Irish- or English-speaking. Such planning will ensure that schools collaborate and guide future investment.

This is the way to deliver effective, modern education — and that is what this is about. The entitlement framework is designed to ensure that, when it comes to making decisions at 14 and again at 16, all young people will have a much broader choice. Currently, that choice is too restricted in many schools. Some young people have as few as eight subjects to choose from at A level. We propose that young people have a choice of at least 24 courses at Key Stage 4, and 27 at 16, with a balance that ensures that at least one third are academic, at least a third vocational or technical, and the rest made up of an appropriate combination.

Ach deirim seo: ní thig linn a leithéid de churaclam leathnaithe a sholáthar muna mbíonn scoileanna agus coláistí ag comhobair agus ag roinnt áiseanna agus eolais. Ní bheadh an t-airgead ann lena dhéanamh. Ach cuirfidh pleanáil éifeachtach atá bunaithe sa cheantar ar ár gcumas córas roghanna agus áiméar den chineál a sholáthar.

Let me be clear: we cannot deliver such an expanded curriculum without schools and colleges co-operating and sharing facilities and expertise. It would be financially impossible. However, through effective area-based planning, we can deliver such a system of choices and opportunities. Local expertise, knowledge and energy, including contributions from local educationalists and parents during the consultation process, will be crucial in all of that.

In December 2007, I promised to update the Assembly on how we would advance area-based planning in the post-primary sector. Having already briefed the Chairperson of the Education Committee, this morning I met members of the Committee, and I thank them all for that. I have shared my thoughts on the issue with the Minister for Employment and Learning. I now set out how we will organise the process.

As the role of the education and skills authority is central, the timing is related to its establishment in April 2009. Full area-based plans covering pre-school, primary and post-primary sectors on the model outlined are not expected to be in place until 2010 at the earliest. However, it is my intention, given the need to address issues of transfer and offer young people the choice that they need at 14, to make the delivery of the entitlement framework mandatory from 2013, and consequently to introduce the first election at 14 at that time.

To meet that timescale, I am announcing a post-primary area-based planning process which will proceed from next year, in advance of full area-based planning. This will be used to identify the structural change required for the delivery to every young person of election at 14 and the entitlement framework from 2013.

The full area-based planning criteria will be decided through a short consultation process. The main elements in the proposed approach to area-based planning are: a central role for the education and skills authority in the production of draft area plans, within a policy framework set by the Department of Education; the importance of sustainable schools, a new policy on which will be published shortly; a process including asset management, development of area plans, strategic investment plans and project appraisal; consultation on an area and sub-area basis, involving the sectors and the schools; and plans that cover all forms of schools and the contribution of DEL and the FE sector in the process.

11.30 am

The area-based planning process for the post-primary sector will be initiated and driven by a representative central group that will be independently chaired. The group will involve one senior figure from each of the education and library boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools trustees, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, the Governing Bodies Association and the Council for Integrated Education. It will include

a representative from the trade unions; a representative from the Education and Training Inspectorate; representatives from DEL and the Association of Colleges in the North; an educational expert from the South; and a representative from the team that is working to set up the education and skills authority.

That central group will be complemented by five specific area groups, which will be chaired by an independent person and involve a representative from each of the sectors and the further education sector. It will be the responsibility of those groups to consult with the sectors and the schools and to submit preliminary area-based plans for approval by the central group. In addition, schools in local areas may act collectively to bring forward their own proposals to the area-based groups for consideration.

Chun críocha riaracháin, tá na grúpaí bunaithe sa cheantar seo eagraithe ar theorainneacha na mbord oideachais agus leabharlainne atá ann cheana féin, ach, más gá, rachaidh fo-cheantair trasna na dteorainneacha seo.

Although the area-based groups are organised using existing education and library board boundaries for the purposes of administration, sub-areas will cross those boundaries where necessary. The approach to boundaries will have to be flexible, given that the maintained sector uses diocesan and parish boundaries, and that planning must take account of the flows of children, rather than fixed boundaries.

The terms of reference for the central group and the five area groups will be published this week. They will require those groups to develop plans capable of delivering the most dynamic, vibrant and effective schools to be accessed by transfer at age 11, and of offering the post-14 curriculum pathway that is appropriate to the young person. The task is to ensure that young people can access the education pathway that is most suited to their needs through the flexible organisation of an area's schools and including collaboration with local further education colleges.

The work at central and local levels will take full account of the existing school structures; existing approvals for school capital projects; existing sectoral plans for development; existing further education provision; data on existing and projected enrolments; data on performance and other aspects of quality; progress towards the provision of the entitlement framework; the impact of and on transport policy; opportunities to promote sustainable schools and sharing between schools; and opportunities for mergers or federations in the development of learning communities.

I will shortly announce the membership of the central and area groups; the chairpersons will be announced before the end of this week. The area groups will be asked to report their progress to the central group at

regular intervals and to submit final reports to it by the end of October. I expect the central group to submit complete area-based plans to the Department so that those can go out to consultation immediately after that. I want the consultation process on the completed area plans to be finished by January 2009.

Tá mé muiníneach gur céim mhór chun tosaigh na pleananna seo i bpróiseas na pleanála bunaithe sa cheantar; ar ndóigh, rachaidh an próiseas sin thar an earnáil iarbhunscolaíochta go gach earnáil ón bhliain dhá mhíle a naoi.

I am confident that the plans will be a major advance in the overall area-based planning process, which will of course extend beyond the post-primary sector from 2009. I have stated many times that it is not a question of advocating a one-size-fits-all system. Indeed, the delivery of essential curriculum reform and a structured response to demographic decline make area-based planning essential. Individual schools cannot be expected to deliver such expanded choices alone. The delivery of the entitlement framework requires area-level planning of provision in order to succeed and deliver for young people.

Dealing with the effects of demographic decline also requires an area-based planning response. At the same time as the entitlement framework calls for an expansion of post-14 provision, falling pupil numbers are restricting the range of provision that many schools can offer. That restriction is already being felt.

Secondary schools have borne the brunt of falling rolls, while the grammar-school sector has lowered entrance requirements to lessen the effects of demographic decline. Even without the need to expand post-14 provision, school viability will require the education sectors in all areas to plan the future of an area's provision together.

Those proposals are about providing greater choice, opportunities and flexibility for young students — and I am glad to see some of those young students here today. I also expect those plans to be a major step in delivering a modern education service for all young people, now and in the decades to come, thereby reversing the tail of educational underachievement that has been the reality for many passing through our current system.

I encourage everyone in the Assembly to play a constructive role in the process as together we shape an education system for the future. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr S Wilson): I start by thanking the Minister for giving the Committee the opportunity to have a preview of her statement this morning. The Committee appreciated the fact that it had an early warning and an opportunity to speak to the Minister about the proposals. That is the end of the compliments, by the way.

Committee members recognise that, at a time when there is demographic decline and a need for a widening of the curriculum, there will be a requirement to change the school estate. The Committee and I have a number of concerns about the Minister's statement. I will outline three of those concerns, and I know that Members will want to raise other issues.

First, the Minister said that this post-primary area-based planning:

“will be used to identify the structural change required for the delivery to every young person of election at 14 and the entitlement framework from 2013”.

The Minister's preferred option is for provision for ages 11 to 14, and then for ages 14 to 19 in the post-primary sector. However, that is not the preferred option of many of the parties in the Assembly, nor has the proposal been agreed by the Assembly. Will the Minister assure us that the terms of reference of the area-based planning groups will not be such that they will pre-empt the Assembly's view on her plans for schools for 11-14 schools and for 14-19 schools and that local areas will have the ability to choose the structure they want?

Secondly, the Minister said that the central planning group will comprise representatives from all the various sectors — there will even be a representative from the Republic of Ireland. However, the one group that is not mentioned is the Protestant Churches, which has a big role to play in education provision in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister assure us that that oversight will be remedied before the composition of the group is finally decided?

Thirdly, the central group will be obliged to consult all the various providers, but, as we know, some providers have run ahead of other providers in various parts of Northern Ireland. What does consultation mean, and at what point will the central group or the area-based planning group be able to intervene in the plans of another body, if those plans are seen to be detrimental to the provision of schools in other sectors?

The Committee will wish to ask the Minister many other questions as the process continues, but, for now, I would like the Minister to provide assurance on those three points.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Education for his questions. My meeting with the Committee this morning was useful, and I will take on board many of the Committee's comments.

You asked about structural change and the terms of reference. I do not know where you got the idea that 11-14 schools are my option. I have always said that a one-size-fits-all system is not what is needed. I have also always said that different solutions will be required for different areas. Furthermore, I have always said

that I want to ensure that all the different options are kept open.

The terms of reference will be published this week. I assure the Chairperson that some of the areas that we will be considering include access to 11-19 schools; transfers to alternative schools at age 14; and access across the learning community, which involves collaborative arrangements between groups of schools and the FE sector. There have already been good practice and collaborative arrangements between those learning communities. We will also consider provisions for 11-14 schools and 14-19 schools within an area.

Sin an chéad cheist, agus anois an dara ceist.

The second question was about the central planning group and the Protestant Churches. The education and library boards will be represented on that group, and we should not pre-empt who they will nominate. I assure the Member that the chairpersons who are appointed will be broadly reflective of society, and Protestant Churches will be included in that.

You talked about different sectors running ahead. Although, in the past, different sectors have done good work, there were instances in which different plans were made for children across those sectors. For the first time, we will now have a process in which the different sectors are sitting down together.

Proposals have been produced, for example, in Fermanagh, where the education and library board has been conducting pre-consultation exercises. The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) has also produced proposals for consultation. Both have said that they will take into account, and be part of, the area-based planning process.

Therefore, there is consensus in the House and among educationalists on the need for area-based planning, especially given the demographic decline in the system.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that this is an opportunity to ask questions, not to make further statements.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement and for meeting the Committee this morning. I also thank Committee members for the constructive way in which they engaged with the Minister.

In recent months, I have learned of a number of proposals, including plans for an educational village at the Lisanelly site in Omagh and a cross-sectoral proposal in Moy, both of which are progressive. Will the Minister confirm whether those types of naturally grown proposals will be welcomed by the subgroups that will be set up, and also by her Department?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I have met the representatives of the Omagh group of educationalists, who were from different sectors, different schools and different Christian Churches. It was good to see the work that they have done.

I know that there is an adjournment debate in the House this evening on Lisanelly, and I look forward to contributing to it. That is precisely the type of collaboration that we are considering. We need to try to build support, with the different sectors having their schools, but also maximum collaboration between and among schools.

Omagh is not the only area in which there are models of good practice; there have been models of good practice in Ballymena, there have been learning communities in Ballyclare and there has been collaboration between the post-primary and further education sectors in Newry.

The terms of reference and the new groups will aim to build on good practice in areas where there is an organic coming together. Local groups will be encouraged to produce their ideas, and there will be maximum consultation. At the end of the day, educationalists are the people who understand the issues, as they have been delivering at the coalface for many years. They understand the needs of the system and the importance of working together.

I would expect any group working in the Western Education and Library Board area to consider the proposals for Omagh. However, I do not want to pre-empt any decisions. It is for the working group to make proposals, all of which I will consider. The point is that there will be consensus and a dynamic period throughout the North, in which, for the first time ever, many — though not all — sectors will come together to plan the schools estate.

11.45 am

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for bringing her statement home to the Assembly at long last. Members expected a proposal on 29 February, as this is a leap year. However, we did not get it; we were sorely disappointed. The roses did not arrive either, by the way.

Mr S Wilson: Would we have accepted them had they arrived?

Mr K Robinson: Of course.

Recently, the Education Committee travelled to the city of Londonderry, where it saw collaboration among all sectors; it also heard of examples in the Limavady area. Can the Minister assure the House that she will build on that good practice and will not force a template upon areas that already tackle their own particular needs?

Did the Minister present the document to the Executive at their last meeting? Has she also spoken to and shown a copy of the document to the Minister for Employment and Learning? It is my understanding that the Minister for Employment and Learning has not agreed to anything at present and will not do so until he has carefully studied all the details. He reserves his position until then.

My colleague Sammy Wilson raised two points about transferors' representatives and another point about the situation in Fermanagh, to which I want to refer. Can the Minister assure the House that rather than boards making representations on behalf of transferors, transferors will have representation in their own right on the area boards? That is most important in overcoming mistrust.

Ms Ruane: It would have been dangerous for me to make the proposals on 29 February; I might have been tempted to propose to certain Members. I wanted to resist that temptation. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Storey: The Minister knows what the answer would be. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Ruane: Thanks, Mervyn. I have, however, brought the proposals to the House today, and I apologise if they are three days or two and a half days or two and a quarter days late. They are here now.

I absolutely agree with the Member: interesting work on collaboration is being done in Limavady. Visiting one of the town's schools, I was struck that children were wearing four different uniforms — those of schools from different sectors, including a special school. The children all worked together.

During a discussion with the teachers, I asked them how they found the situation. They replied that although it had been a long process, it worked well. I asked the young people how they found it. They said that it was great, because they no longer had to pass by one another's school gates feeling like "others". It was encouraging to hear the young people say that it was great to know children from other schools and to have been to every other school and that they wanted the arrangement to continue. They had no worries whatsoever. It was lovely to see how the education of children from the local special school was part and parcel of the arrangement. That is how the system should progress.

Before the debate, I sent a copy of the document to every one of my MLA colleagues. Yesterday, I discussed the proposals with Reg Empey, although I accept that he has not agreed to every aspect of them. However, as I said, I have shared the proposals with him. He agrees that further education must be an important part of any discussion, and we will examine existing further education plans. I will also bring those proposals before the Executive. Formulation of policies is at an early stage.

Mr K Robinson: With all due respect to the Minister, she did not answer my question on transferors.

Ms Ruane: I have already answered the question on transferors.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá ceist agam faoin amscála agus faoi pholasaí na scoileanna incothaithe.

As the sustainable schools policy is the foundation stone of area-based planning, can the Minister give the Assembly a date when it will become available?

Given that the consultation on area-based planning will not end until January 2009, after which further time will be taken to make a final decision, is the Minister concerned — as many others are — that there is not enough time for post-primary area-based planning to be implemented in time for the transfer of pupils in 2010? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. A new policy on sustainable schools will be published soon; that issue was dealt with in the Education Committee today.

The process is evolving, dynamic and will feed into the wider area-based planning process. However, this is a good start. Members from all sides of the House have called on me to bring forward these proposals; I have now done so, and I am confident that we can make progressive changes in our education system in the required timescale. However, that change is evolving and 2010 and 2013 are key dates. I ask that all Members work with me on this and, from the good discussion in the Education Committee meeting this morning, I can see that there is broad agreement on how to advance area-based planning, despite slight differences in emphasis.

Mr Lunn: I apologise for my absence from the Committee meeting this morning — I might have heard something that I have not heard today.

The Alliance Party broadly welcomes the Minister's statement. The buzzwords seem to be "collaboration" and "good practice". The Minister has acknowledged that the delivery of the expanding curriculum is impossible without extensive co-operation between schools and colleges, particularly across the sectors.

Although I welcome the statement, I share the concerns that have been expressed — I did not hear the Minister answer the question about transferors, so I ask it again.

We understand that people want a balanced curriculum, but how does the Minister think that subjects can be categorised as exclusively academic, vocational or technical? For example, in which category is physics? The first selection at 14 years of age will be in 2013, and the last 11-plus examination will be in November

2008, so there will be a five-year gap. Will the Minister clarify what will happen in that period?

Ms Ruane: Mr Lunn's words on collaboration and good practice were more of a comment than a question. I view collaboration as good practice; some of the most dynamic collaboration that I have seen has resulted in vibrant schools. I refer to collaboration in the post-primary sector as well as between the post-primary and the further-education sectors. I saw tremendous collaboration between schools and educationalists through use of the internet — one young person in Ashfield Girls' High School, who was probably one of many, did one of her courses through technology, which is one of the ways to expand the curriculum.

I categorise curriculum subjects as technical and professional for ease of reference and understanding, but the Member is correct — a tiler must have good vocational skills as well as good mathematical skills, and an engineer requires good vocational skills as well as good scientific and mathematical skills. I take the Member's point. We try to ensure that vocational qualifications are given the esteem that they deserve and have not been given in the past. That is something that we are changing.

I was at the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition in Dublin and saw Abbey Christian Brothers' Grammar School in Newry do very well in the technology section. That was good to see. The more that that type of thing happens, the more all our young people benefit.

I assure Members that there will be broad-based representation in the central planning group. People will see that when I announce the chairpersons and how we intend to move forward.

The age of 14 is already an important stage in the system at which major decisions on education pathways are made and young people decide which subjects to pursue. It is an informed and uncontentious elective process. They decide whether to study triple award science, extra maths, art, engineering, technology, home economics or whatever. I am confident that the system allows sufficient time for such decisions.

During my discussions with educationalists, I was struck by their huge knowledge of the system. As they work in the system daily, they understand its needs and deficits, and there is a very mature discussion with educationalists ongoing.

I want admissions criteria regulations to have the support of stakeholders and the approval of the Assembly, but such consensus takes time to develop. It can be frustrating but, as Trevor Lunn will agree, building consensus with the educationalists is the fastest route to the safest and surest system.

Mr Storey: I am glad that the Minister knows the difference between collusion and collaboration.

I do not accept that the manner in which the Minister brought the matter to the House today in any way fulfils what she said when she appeared before the Committee for Education on 31 January. She told the Committee that her statement would cover "area-based planning" and its "terms of reference". She further stated:

"I will engage with the Committee on this matter before I make that statement."

People cannot believe a word that the Minister says.

Given that the Minister missed an opportunity to outline her proposal on 29 February 2008, I assume that she thinks that this is a shotgun wedding. I assure her —

Mr Speaker: Please ask a question.

Mr Storey: I assure the Minister that the mood music is no different in relation to the outstanding issues.

In the past three years, 20 controlled schools and five maintained schools have closed. Will the Minister today place a moratorium on the closure, or the proposed closure, of any more schools? For example, there are proposals to close Maghera High School and schools in Fermanagh and other areas. Will she draw a line under school closures because, as the Chairperson of the Committee said, other sectors have moved ahead on selection?

Are Members to believe that the policy on sustainable schools that was published in April 2007 has been binned? The Committee has not been consulted; the Minister has not given a response, and her statement today states:

"the importance of sustainable schools, a new policy on which will be published shortly".

What is going on? Is the document of April 2007 being binned? In contrast to her vision, which remains misty, will the Minister give Members a clear answer?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. Members could have a long debate on collusion, but this is neither the place nor the time.

I found this morning's meeting with the Committee for Education useful, and I am sorry that Mr Storey did not. The tone of the debate demonstrates that there is broad consensus on how to progress area-based planning.

I am not into shotguns in any context — and certainly not shotgun weddings. I like to take my time to plan, which is what I did, and I brought the resulting carefully considered statements to the House today. I am sorry that the Member does not agree. People can see that my Department is introducing a robust series of policies, such as every school should be a good school and the vision of area-based planning that I

outlined on 4 December 2007, of which sustainable schools will be part.

As the Member is on the Committee for Education, he knows that it is not me who brings forward proposals for school closure: that is done by the various sectoral groups, such as the CCMS.

Then there is a period of consultation, and I make a decision. However, the process is initiated by the different sectors, such as Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, NICIE, the boards or the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.

12.00 noon

If the Member had stayed at the meeting this morning, he might have heard more of the proposals that I was presenting. However, I appreciate that people —

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will not take a point of order during a ministerial statement. I will be happy to take it afterwards.

Ms Ruane: I appreciate that Members are busy. Having said that, I have engaged with the Committee for Education at every turn. I have attended more than seven times — probably more often than most Ministers attend their respective Committees — and I plan to continue engaging with it. My officials have attended the Committee nearly every week to discuss key issues, and I am delighted that they have done so, because it is important that all these policies be developed. Of course there will be before-and-after consultation with the Committee on any of the policies. I thank the Member for his comments, and I ask him to join the rest of us in developing proposals with area-based planning.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement, and I pay tribute to her for her diligence in relation to this matter. First, will she confirm that rural communities will not be disadvantaged by the area-based planning process? Secondly, parents have expressed concern about postcode selection to me and to many other Members. Minister, can you confirm that area-based planning will ensure that that does not happen? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. First, I can confirm that rural areas will play a major role in any area-based planning. I will take account of urban and rural areas when nominating group chairpersons, because, for too long in the North, rural areas have been treated as poor cousins. I aim to ensure that that will no longer be the case. One reason why I chose this particular model was to ensure that, as well as a central group, there would be five local groups to take account of all the different areas, many of which are rural.

As for your question about postcode selection, there are a couple of key points that I want to make. If schools work together, our system has the capacity for areas to respond to, and manage, the ranges of educational choices that pupils will make at 14 and 11. Any method of academic selection will perpetuate social selection. Only access by choice, within a system that is flexible enough to deliver that choice, can truly ensure that access is equal.

Finally, the development of organisational flexibility is crucial. I accept that it will take time, but area-based planning will be central to developing that flexibility. Local solutions will be part of that flexibility. To return to your first point, rural — as well as urban — areas will be part of the area-based planning process. Go raibh maith agat.

Miss McIlveen: The Minister said that the area-based planning process will be initiated and driven by a representative central group. First, I note that a single representative from each sector will be present, irrespective of the size of the different sectors' schools estates. To put that in the context of the Assembly, the Green Party would have a seat on the Executive. Will the Minister ensure that each sector is fairly represented?

Secondly, Members are being asked to agree to groups being set up, although no one, bar the Minister, knows what the remit of those groups will be. In the spirit of transparency, will she detail the terms of reference today — not some time later this week?

Ms Ruane: It is important that all sectors be represented in the central group.

A good, mature discussion is going on at the moment involving part of the central group and the local groups; it will involve education and library boards, the CCMS, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, the integrated sector and the trade unions. We need maximum collaboration based on respect and equality rather than talk about who is bigger, smaller, weaker or stronger; that is how we will progress. I am delighted that the different sectors will participate, as that is very important. Anyone working in education must take part. It must be cohesive and small enough to get the work done, but it must also be representative, and I assure the Member that it will be representative.

I will announce the terms of reference shortly. I will, however, ensure that the Chairperson of the Committee for Education sees the terms of reference before the announcement, and he can circulate them. I will also announce the chairpersons shortly.

Mr McCallister: The Minister and I represent the same large rural constituency. How does she hope to address the new transport demands, especially in rural areas where closures and amalgamations brought about by the proposals will mean that children will have to

be transported over greater distances and, in some cases, considerable distances?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. Sin ceist an-tábhachtach. That is a very important question. Transport is one of the key areas that must be looked at. Depending on the arrangements — and I do not want to pre-empt those in any area — some children may have to travel further, but in most cases there will be less transport. The beauty of area-based planning is that that is exactly what it is. Although children will have a choice of what type or sector of school they attend, there will be far fewer buses and children passing one another on their way to their respective schools, many travelling to Belfast. Far too many children spend far too much time on buses. From the constituency that we share, John will know that many children spend an hour or an hour and twenty minutes on buses travelling to school — and that is only one way.

I have said before that I could probably do more to clear the roads than Conor Murphy. Everyone recognises that it is important that our —

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ruane: May I finish my point without interruption, David? You will have an opportunity to make a point or to ask a question.

Transport will be considered by the local and central groups as it is a key area in education.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that they may not intervene during a ministerial statement.

Mrs M Bradley: I share some of John McCallister's concerns. At first glance, it is clear that area-based planning will require investment. Has the Minister sought an assurance from the Minister of Finance and Personnel — or been given such an assurance — on the additional transport and investment costs needed?

Ms Ruane: An estimate of costs can be produced only when the area-based planning process has developed plans for all areas. However, the notions of massive restructuring and huge costs that we have seen in some of the media are wildly inaccurate. The proposed reforms assume affordable costs for sound reasons. We all know that we face restructuring investment because of the need for sustainability, and that investment can help to deliver my reforms. We should not forget, first, that school collaboration offers flexibility without major restructuring; and secondly, that due to surplus capacity, we have great potential for flexibility already.

Issues of cost are at the heart of my progressive reforms. Our system wastes money; unreformed, it will waste more. Broadly, two thirds of our post-primary schools are undersubscribed and a quarter is less than three quarters full — and that is before the full demographic decline reaches in our post-primary

schools. Members are presuming that there will be more transport costs: equally, there may be fewer. We will consider the proposals when they are produced.

At the appropriate moment, I will engage in the appropriate way with my colleagues on the Executive, including my colleague, the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Ms J McCann: I warmly welcome this being the first time that all the sectors will be sitting down together to plan the educational future of children in any area. Does the Minister feel that this is a welcome development that can only enhance educational provision in any area?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is exciting that all sectors are going to be sitting down together and, for the first time, planning our schools estate. There have been models of good practice and they were a vanguard, and fair play to them. We can learn from where there has been good practice. This will mean that we can provide a broader, flexible and more stimulating education for all our children. It will mean that we can celebrate academic success in our system but begin to deal with the tail of underachievement. I know that everyone in this House agrees with me that we need to deal with that tail of underachievement. We need to give every one of our young people the opportunities that they deserve. We need to stem the flow of 12,000 people leaving school without a GCSE in English and maths because that state of affairs is just not fair. We are on the cusp of something very exciting and I am looking forward to working with all of you in that. I do sense a different tone in this House today and I welcome that tone because I sense that there is also a realism about the need for us to bring about changes — although there are a few notable exceptions to the tone. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Ross: I too have concerns about the focus in the Minister's statement on transfer at 14.

The Minister said that she might not bring forward the proposals to close schools yet that she favours area-based planning. Therefore, can the Minister not instruct those bodies that there are to be no further closures until the area plans are developed? I noted that the Minister did not answer the question from Mr Ken Robinson about the representative central committee. There is no specific mention of Protestant clergy even though the Protestant clergy have had a massive role in education in Northern Ireland over many years. Although the Minister did refer to the education and library boards being able to appoint clergy, there is no guarantee of that being the case. Is that not, therefore, a gap in her proposals, especially since she said that she will appoint someone from the South — by which I presume she means Irish Republic rather than Newry or Fermanagh? Is it not the fact that she has simply overlooked the Protestant clergy in her

proposals, and should she not now amend them to include Protestant clergy so that she does not start another unnecessary fight with the Unionist community and the Protestant Churches?

Ms Ruane: Some people think I favour transfer at 14, some people within the Member's party think that I favour transfer at 11. What I have said is that I have kept all options open: 11 to 14; 14 to 19; 11 to 19; 16 to 19. People should be clear about that. It will be different depending on where you live: what school a child goes to; what further education college is available in your area, and what collaboration is happening.

Area-based planning does not necessarily mean school closures. However, we do have to recognise, as George Bain has made clear, that we quite simply have too many schools given the demographic decline at the moment. Demographic decline, particularly in the post-primary sector, will increase over the next few years. At the same time, we have to expand post-14 provision and ensure that all children have access to the education they need in a flourishing educational environment. Area-based planning is a key to achieving this. I reiterate: it is not I who brings forward proposals. Obviously, we are now moving into a period of area-based planning and all the sectors working on their proposals will be a part of that.

I have said that all Churches will be represented, and that will be seen when I present my choice of chairpersons.

Please do not try to create an issue that does not exist.

When I refer to the South, I mean the South of Ireland. In future I will be more explicit and I will use the terms North of Ireland and South of Ireland to provide clarity; but yes, there will be a representative from the South of Ireland on the representative central committee.

12.15 pm

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as a ráiteas.

I thank the Minister for making her statement on area-based planning. I am sorry that I missed the Committee meeting this morning — *[Interruption.]*

I was at Lagan Valley Hospital trying with my fellow MLAs trying to fight the proposed cuts — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Butler: There seems to have been a mixed response at this morning's Committee meeting. When the Committee met on 29 February, some members were hoping that the Minister would bring forward proposals; the Member for North Antrim in particular was a bit miffed when the Minister did not turn up to propose to him, which is possibly why he is so angry today — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Storey: She is only here because we forced her.

Mr Butler: On more serious matters, today's statement represents a major part of the jigsaw that was outlined in Caitríona Ruane's statement last December. It is a welcome step forward in the debate on transfer from primary to post-primary education; it follows on from the Bain Report —

Mr Speaker: I must insist that the Member comes to his question.

Mr Butler: My question concerns area-based groups and subgroups. I believe the Minister is going to announce the chairs of those groups this week, but when will she be in a position to announce their memberships? Her statement also refers to the basing of those subgroups on the education and library board areas, but as the Minister knows, given changing and declining demographics, there needs to be some degree of flexibility. She referred to that need, but will it be taken into account when the area-based plans are drawn up, so that they will not adhere rigidly to the education and library board areas? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. Even though you could not attend the meeting of the Education Committee, you were very well represented by your colleague Michelle O'Neill. In relation to a comment made by Mervyn Storey; no one has forced me to do anything. On 4 December 2007 I said that I would make a further statement detailing the progress made on the issue. I am happy to be here today to make that statement, because it is a very important issue.

As for the area-based groups, I will be announcing the chairs of those groups this week, and they will be up and running in March. We need to move quickly, and have set ourselves a time frame, which I have outlined. In reply to the Member's point, I agree that there must be flexibility across board areas, because parish boundaries and board boundaries are different. Mr Butler's constituency stretches across the Belfast Education and Library Board and South Eastern Education and Library Board areas, and of course those two must work together if we are to have an interconnected system.

The five local area-based groups need to be interconnected in the way that all of my educational policies are interconnected; the curriculum; the transfer; the area based planning; the sustainable schools and the aim to make every school a good school. All of those policies are interconnected, and they are all going to be working together. Educationalists know that: they are not going to create artificial borders around Tyrone, Fermanagh or Belfast, because we have seen that borders have not served us well in the past, and I do not think they will do so in the future. Go raibh maith agat. That is the answer to the question.

Mrs Foster: The Minister will be aware, having attended an Adjournment debate in the House in

relation to the matter, that the pre-consultation document issued by the Western Education and Library Board was roundly rejected by the community in County Fermanagh. That document envisaged all post-primary education in the western board area being located in Enniskillen. I listened very carefully to what the Minister said to John McCallister about transport, and I say to the Minister that transport will be a huge issue in Fermanagh if those proposals are approved. I ask her to learn the lessons of the pre-consultation process in the western board area and to engage with everybody, including the Transferor Representatives' Council, which, it has to be said, has played a crucial role in education in this country since its inception.

It is very disappointing that the Transferor Representatives' Council does not have a position, as of right, on the new area-based planning boards.

Ms Ruane: It is great that there are so many young people in the Gallery today. I welcome all of them, because it is their —

Mr McNarry: That is very kind of you. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Ruane: You and all the young people in the Gallery, David. We are as young as we feel. It is good to have the children here because, at the end of the day, we are building for their future, and trying to ensure that they have an opportunity to access the broadest possible curriculum and to meet their counterparts in different sectors. It is fitting that they are here today, and I should like to give them a big céad míle fáilte — a hundred thousand welcomes.

I turn to Arlene Foster's comment about Fermanagh. Obviously, the local group set up for the Western Education and Library Board area will consider both the pre-consultation proposals and the CCMS consultation — that is what area-based planning is all about. Transport is obviously a key issue. As I said earlier, it will be one of the issues that the local groups will look at. It is a key issue in relation to any proposals that we bring forward. It can be very costly. Depending on what proposals are put forward, sometimes more transport will be required, while less will be needed in other cases. Members should not pre-empt the work of the Committee, the working groups, the central group or the area groups; rather, let us see what they come forward with.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Minister for her statement. I am reminded, however, of the quotation:

"The louder he talked of his honor, the faster we counted our spoons."

[Laughter.]

Once again in this House, I question the Minister about the logic of excluding the Transferor Representatives' Council from the area-based planning boards. Places are guaranteed to people from the education and library boards, who could deputise for the transferors,

but that is not guaranteed. There are representatives from CCMS, the Irish-language sector, the governing bodies, NICIE, the trade unions, the Education and Training Inspectorate, DEL and the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges. There is even an educational expert from the Free State, and a representative from the team that is working to set up the ESA. All of those groups may be important, but equally important to many people —

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

Mr Kennedy: Equally important is the role and expertise of the Transferor Representatives' Council. It is impossible to create area-based planning boards without guaranteeing a place, or places, to the Transferor Representatives' Council. I ask the Minister to tell the House that she will change the proposed plans and ensure that a representative of the Transferor Representatives' Council is included on each of the area-based planning boards.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat as sin. Thank you for that. I have said it before, and I will say it again — I will make sure that everyone is represented in my proposals.

Mr Gallagher: I have two questions to put to the Minister. The first one is about small schools — two simple words that have not cropped up in anything that has been written or said here today. Will the Minister tell us whether she thinks that it will be a good thing if the area plans lead to there being no post-primary school in west Fermanagh, or in Tyrone west of Omagh? Indeed, there are very few controlled primary schools in either of those areas. Does the Minister recognise that it would be a disaster if there were no such schools in those places? The Minister — even when prompted and pushed by her colleague, Mr Willie Clarke — danced around the subject of rural schools.

A rural school in Bessbrook might have 1,500 to 1,800 pupils; a rural school in west Fermanagh might have 250 pupils. Those schools represent the character of their area and, therefore, should not be overlooked.

I welcome, and, indeed, agree with the Minister's point that secondary schools have borne the brunt of falling enrolments as a result of grammar schools lowering entrance requirements. Essentially, the law of the jungle is in operation: if a school is big enough, it can get away with doing that, and the small schools suffer. Enrolments to grammar schools must be limited. Will the Minister consider that as part of the plan, given that the parcel will stop with her?

Ms Ruane: I have spoken about rural schools and stated that I am implementing a policy on sustainable schools. I made points, which I can repeat, about school closures. Area-based planning does not mean school closures, but the Assembly must recognise, as George

Bain has made clear, that there are currently too many schools. Demographic decline, particularly in the post-primary sector, will increase in the next few years.

Regional imbalance and regional disparity also exists, and the Executive must deal with that. Fermanagh has fewer people because much of its population must travel outside the county to find work. I know that the Member will agree that it is important to build sustainable communities.

The Bain proposals do not tackle the issue of numbers alone. They also tackle educational quality, and six different criteria are used for small schools to measure that. The House must be careful not to scaremonger. We must have a responsible debate, but we must recognise that demographic decline exists and that it will continue.

Lord Morrow: The Minister continually speaks to the House about equality, which seems to be her central theme. However, there is a lack of equality in the detail of her statement. When Mr Sammy Wilson challenged her about whether the Protestant clergy would be included on groups, she suggested that she could not pre-empt whom the education and library boards would assign to them. The Minister has produced a list of those groups that will be included as of right, so why has she not included the Protestant clergy? Why has she not prioritised considering that? This side of the House is angry that she has deliberately ignored that issue. The Minister must take cognisance of that fact and return to the House and tell Members directly that she has corrected it, because the situation is blatantly unacceptable.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Ruane: I do not know what the question is, but equality is at the heart of my proposals. The sectors represented take account of the education system, are from all areas of the community and satisfy the equality duty. I want to ensure broad representation — rural, urban, Churches —

Mr Kennedy: Does that include Protestant Churches?

Ms Ruane: Yes. I have said that.

Lord Morrow: Make sure you do not just talk about it.

Mr Kennedy: It is a disgrace.

Ms Ruane: Excuse me, I ask Members to stop interrupting me and let me make the points that I am trying to make.

Mr Kennedy: Act like a Minister.

Mr McNarry: Do you want sympathy?

Ms Ruane: No, I do not want sympathy —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

Ms Ruane: I never expect sympathy. I want fair play, and I want Members not to interrupt me. Equality is at the heart of my proposals. Those sectors represented cover the current education system. The Catholic trustees and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools comprise one sector — not two, as some Members have implied. I have also considered gender issues, which the House sometimes overlooks. When I announce my chairpersons, Members will see that men and women, from rural and urban areas, and from all sectors of society, are represented. Go raibh maith agat as sin.

12.30 pm

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her statement.

Mr Gallagher discussed rural schools. Given that the Minister of the Environment is in the Chamber, perhaps she will consider how PPS 14 can be applied to those schools.

I commend Mr Wilson, the Chairperson of the Committee for Education. It must be very exciting in that Committee, with everyone discussing proposals, roses and shotguns.

Is the Minister aware of the transfer process from primary to post-primary education that the Catholic sector implemented in Keady some 20-odd years ago? If so, will she outline her views on it? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. I am aware of what happened in Keady 25 years ago — it was a very dynamic, interesting process. All the primary schools in the Catholic sector got together and worked out how the transfer from primary to post-primary education would operate. There is now an amazing post-primary school there that provides different pathways for all different children, based on —

Mr Kennedy: That does not reflect the rest of the country.

Ms Ruane: I am sorry; I ask that Mr Kennedy refrain from interrupting me.

That school provides academic and vocational pathways, and I bear in mind Trevor's comments, with which I agree. The process that brought about that system was very good, and we can learn certain things from it. Obviously, rather than examining just one sector, we need to consider collaboration between all different sectors. Given that, however, the way in which the proposals for Keady were made is certainly a shining example. School inspectors confirm that it is an amazing school that performs very well.

There is a great deal of good practice in many areas, which I have already mentioned — Ballyclare, Ballymena, Limavady, Derry, Newry, Omagh, and Cookstown. The educationalists in those areas are ahead of the posse, and they are saying that we need change and

that we need to work together. Let us do that. I know that those educationalists will value the vision that has been announced today because they know that changes need to happen.

Mrs Long: I have a couple of questions for the Minister. However, I will first stress the importance of the Transferor Representatives' Council. It is important that the transferors are not under-represented as a result of the fact that a range of interests are represented on the education and library boards. That means that there is no guarantee that those who will be selected will reflect the views of the transferors. The transferors play a particular role in the education system. That role must be recognised, and I hope that the Minister will reassure us that that will happen.

I want to look specifically at the issue of area planning, which the Alliance Party welcomes. According to the Minister's proposal, six new structures will be created with a view to dealing with the issue of area planning on a time-limited basis. However, area planning is an ongoing issue; it is not a one-off, because there will be continuing demographic change. How, therefore, will the Department handle the replication of bureaucracy?

I concur with Mr Butler's point that traditionally there have been problems at the boundaries. For example, the geography of greater east Belfast means that natural boundaries could be planned, but those do not match the boards' boundaries. Indeed, the Minister will be aware of specific incidents in which schools on the boundaries of east Belfast were closed without regard to the needs of the people in that area. I want to know what specific obligations will be placed on the groups to ensure that they consult specifically on those boundary issues.

Lastly, given all the other interests that are being taken into account, how will the views of the local community be acknowledged? Would the Minister consider conducting a community audit to allow forward planning in the education system, so that change therein can be managed according to the wishes of the parents whose children will go through that system? We have heard a lot about organic change and where that has worked, but I would like to see a system whereby, if there is an impetus for change in an area, a mechanism exists that allows people to make that change.

Mr Speaker: Unfortunately, the Minister has approximately two minutes to answer.

Ms Ruane: I thank the Member for her thoughtful questions.

I am certainly not in the business of setting up bureaucracy; I am trying to get rid of unnecessary bureaucracy. The Member will be aware of how the RPA is dealing with that.

Some people have said that I did not set up enough groups. That was one of the points that were made at

the Education Committee meeting this morning. Establishing five groups across the North — using the existing boundaries of the education and library boards — is the way to go.

I agree that there must be flexibility in those groups. They must be interconnected and must work together. If not, they will miss out on the borderline areas. I have made the point about borders before; they do not always serve in the way that was intended.

The groups that I have set up are time bound — they will not be bureaucracies, and they will not last for ever. The process will continue to evolve, but the groups are time bound. Local communities are important in those plans. I know that I sound like a broken record, but I do not want to pre-empt local groups —

Mr McNarry: You certainly have broken down.

Ms Ruane: Thanks, Danny — or was it David?

Go raibh maith agat. I am glad to take compliments — but we will not go there.

Local communities are very important. Their voices must be heard, and that is why the plans are flexible. Local groups can feed into the five area groups, and we will actively encourage that.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Earlier, an assertion was made to the effect that I was failing in my duties as a member of the Education Committee. I remind the Minister that I informed the Chairperson of the Education Committee that, owing to business in the House, which commenced at 10.30 am, I had to be in the House to deputise for the Minister's colleague Mr McLaughlin, the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, who has a bug. I hope it is not an M15 bug. That is why I was not at the Education Committee meeting.

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order. The business of a Committee is not the business of this House.

Mrs Long: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On a previous occasion in the Chamber, one of my colleagues was corrected for making reference to the Public Gallery. On a number of occasions during numerous interventions this morning — not just in this debate, but in previous debates — references were made to the Public Gallery. Is it not correct that we should not be referring to the Public Gallery, or playing to it, but dealing with the issues that are raised in the Chamber?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: The Member's point of order is well made. Members ought to know that they should not refer to the Public Gallery on any occasion. That is an important point of order, and has been the subject of rulings made in the House on several occasions. Nevertheless, Ministers and Members are still referring to the Public Gallery.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Standing Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is a motion on the membership of a Standing Committee. As with other similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Thomas Burns replace Mr Patsy McGlone as a member of the Public Accounts Committee. — [Mr P J Bradley.]

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 sitting was suspended at 12.39 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Hospital-Acquired Infections

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes each. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech.

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

That this Assembly, following the number of deaths associated with hospital acquired infections from 2001 to date, calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to initiate, as a matter of urgency, a full, independent and time-bound public inquiry.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I am very pleased to introduce this motion, which calls for a public inquiry into the current outbreak of clostridium difficile.

The outbreak and spread of the infection has been a cause of great public concern over recent weeks and months, and it continues to be so. The Committee unanimously believes that the only way to get to the bottom of how the outbreak came about, how it is being handled, and, most importantly, how we can begin to restore public confidence is to hold a full, independent public inquiry.

A few months ago the term “clostridium difficile” would have meant little or nothing to the general public or to many Members. However, given the recent outbreak in Antrim Area Hospital and the associated increase in deaths linked to the infection, we are, sadly, all too aware of the infection and the devastation that it can cause and continues to cause.

As well as the suffering of those who are directly affected by the infection, the many untimely deaths, and the anxiety and — in many cases — grief suffered by families and relatives, the Committee unanimously believes that public confidence in the Health Service has been dealt a major blow.

The infection was clearly not on the radar of trusts until very recently. For example, it is worrying to note that, only last September, the Northern Health and Social Care Trust’s submission to the Committee’s inquiry into healthcare-associated infection made no mention of clostridium difficile.

We have all heard stories about people who waited, perhaps for some time, for hospital admission, but who turned down the opportunity for treatment when it was offered because they were concerned about catching an infection in one of the hospitals. We have no way of knowing how many people may have turned down a vital hospital appointment for that reason, but Members have spoken about constituents who have turned down appointments for hospital visits.

The Health Committee visited the Northern Health and Social Care Trust in Antrim on 24 January. Incidentally, the visit was planned some weeks earlier, before the issue of *clostridium difficile* arose. Committee members were briefed by the medical director on the outbreak at that stage and the action that was being taken to control and contain it. That included the setting up of a cohort ward at Antrim Area Hospital and the establishment of a control team in the trust. The trust also provided the Committee with figures on the number of patients suffering from *clostridium difficile* at that stage and the number of deaths associated with the infection since July 2007.

In the light of subsequent confusion over the number of deaths throughout Northern Ireland in which *clostridium difficile* was recorded on death certificates, and in an effort to gain an overall picture of the extent of the infection across all trusts, the Committee called in the chief executives of all five trusts.

They were questioned at length about the issue and the measures that were being taken to control and prevent the spread of the infection. Many of the Members' questions related to public confidence — as, I expect, will the debate today. Confidence in the Health Service was described as being at an all-time low, and it was recognised that openness and transparency were required to start to rebuild public confidence.

At that meeting, the trusts were reluctant to provide figures on the number of cases of infection since the beginning of January and the number of deaths where *clostridium difficile* was a factor, but they agreed to provide the figures separately. Those figures have been received, and some of them make disturbing reading.

From the beginning of January to 14 February, there were 20 cases of *clostridium difficile* in the Western Trust area, 17 of them in Altnagelvin Hospital. There were 26 cases in the Southern Trust area; 17 of those occurred in Craigavon Area Hospital. The Belfast Trust — the largest of the trusts — had 52 cases of *clostridium difficile* during the period. Twenty cases occurred in the Belfast City Hospital, 17 in the Royal Victoria Hospital and 14 in the Mater Hospital. There were 26 cases of *clostridium difficile* in the South Eastern Trust area. In the Northern Trust area, the location of the recent outbreak — worryingly, it is clear that the outbreak is not yet under control — there were 70

cases of *clostridium difficile*, 28 of which were in the Antrim Area Hospital and 14 in Whiteabbey Hospital. That means that 194 cases were recorded in our hospitals in a six-week period.

We also received figures showing the number of deaths that were linked to *clostridium difficile* — that is, cases in which *clostridium difficile* is recorded on the death certificate as being either the direct cause of death or a contributing factor. In the same six weeks, no deaths were linked to *clostridium difficile* in the Western Trust area; one death was so linked in the Southern Trust area, and six in the Belfast Trust area. Two deaths in the South Eastern Trust area were linked to *clostridium difficile*, and the Northern Trust reported 15 deaths in the period up to 15 February, and a further five deaths up to 26 February, in which *clostridium difficile* was a factor. There have, therefore, been 24 deaths linked to *clostridium difficile* in the six-week period, with a further five deaths in the Northern Trust area in the following 11 days to last Tuesday.

As well as providing the Committee with details of the current number of cases of infection, the trusts have outlined the action being taken in their areas to minimise the risk of *clostridium difficile* and to manage patients with suspected or confirmed cases of the infection. The Committee will publish those details on its website.

I am aware that, throughout this period, the Minister has made a series of announcements, including the provision of an additional £9 million over the next three years to improve patient safety. He has also announced initiatives such as the provision of single rooms for new hospitals, and that is, undoubtedly, the way to go in the future. He also announced more immediate measures such as restrictions on hospital visiting, a dress code for all healthcare staff, a regional hand-hygiene campaign and the funding of a pharmacist in each trust area to promote safer prescribing of antibiotics.

Those are welcome measures, and they are issues for which the Health Committee has pushed, so I welcome the fact that the Minister was listening. The Committee urged the Minister to introduce a ban on Health Service staff wearing their uniforms outside of work, particularly when travelling to and from work. However, those measures must be implemented immediately, and they must be rigorously enforced. The task of getting this outbreak under control and restoring public confidence must be the number one priority.

In response to the outbreak, the Minister announced a review by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, and the composition of that review team has been announced. However, the Committee unanimously and strongly feels that such a review is not sufficient to get to the bottom of the outbreak and

to restore public confidence. After hearing from the trusts' chief executives and the Chief Medical Officer at its meeting on 14 February, the Committee unanimously called for a full public inquiry.

The Committee unanimously believes that such an inquiry need not be a long-drawn-out affair that costs the earth, but, rather, it must be given concise terms of reference and a strict time limit.

I am, therefore, saddened that the two Ulster Unionist Members who sit on the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety seek to undermine their colleagues by tabling an amendment that, in my view, amounts to nothing more than playing politics with a serious subject. *Clostridium difficile* cost 77 lives in 2007, and many people have been left seriously ill as a result of contracting the infection. The public will not look too kindly on those Members who tabled the amendment. I hope that no other members of the Committee will go back on their commitment to support the motion tabled by the Committee.

The Minister has resisted calls for a public inquiry. However, since the Committee decided to table the motion, the Minister has indicated that he is minded to carry out an inquiry but only after work on the review is completed. I welcome that change of heart, but I call on the Minister today to make a firm commitment to put in place a full, independent and time-bound public inquiry. Such a commitment would begin to restore public confidence.

The amendment is basically irrelevant, because the motion addresses all the issues that are contained in the amendment. I reiterate the fact that the Committee — including Ulster Unionist Party representation — agreed unanimously to table the motion today.

Mr McCallister: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “Safety” and insert

“to consider initiating a full, independent public inquiry following publication of the independent review by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority.”

Until a few moments ago, the Chairperson of the Committee had made some relevant points, but she then descended into a personal attack on Rev Robert Coulter and me.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: I think that I should have the opportunity to say something first, but go ahead.

Mrs I Robinson: Is the Member indicating that his colleague Rev Dr Coulter did not support the Committee in its unanimous decision to table the motion? Mr McCallister did not attend that Committee meeting — I do not know where he was — but the Rev Dr Coulter did attend, and he indicated that he was content with the motion.

Mr McCallister: I am happy to tell the Member where I was: I was at the count for the Dromore by-election, which, of course, her party called and went on to lose. The Chairperson probably took the vote at that Committee meeting because she knew that I was tied up at the by-election, which involved part of my constituency of South Down.

I support the amendment, and I urge all Members to support it. The Ulster Unionist Party tabled the amendment, because it felt that the wording of the motion indicates that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is opposed to any action on *clostridium difficile* and on all hospital-borne infections, when, in fact, the opposite is the case. The Minister has been very active, and he has placed on record that he is not opposed to an inquiry. That is what makes the terms of the original motion unfair and misleading. Fair-minded Members will realise that that is not the correct way forward, and they will find the wording of the amendment more appropriate in the circumstances. This is too serious an issue for political point scoring, especially as the Minister has made it clear that he is not opposed to a public inquiry.

The Committee does not need to force the Minister to do anything — that would be pushing at an already open door. However, it would be helpful if the Chairperson of the Committee were to permit the Minister to attend Committee meetings.

The Minister has been proactive throughout the hospital-acquired-infections crisis in the same way as he was proactive in sorting out the junior doctors' crisis at the outset of his term of office. In appointing a review team comprising experts in infection control, dominated by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, the Minister has added to the actions that he has already taken in response to the hospital-acquired-infections crisis. Those actions include the introduction of a dress code for healthcare staff and consultation on hospital visiting policy for all trusts. The Minister said that he was confident that his team, which has the necessary knowledge and expertise in infections such as *clostridium difficile*, will thoroughly investigate the current outbreak and report back on any learning that the system must quickly incorporate into its daily practices. That is the key point: quickly.

2.15 pm

The Minister made it clear that, until the current outbreak in the Northern Trust is fully contained, the review group will focus on urgently examining infection-control measures that are being taken in other health trusts. The Minister announced a consultation process on hospital visiting policies, and set out key principles, which include firm restrictions on visiting hours, limits on the number of visitors to a patient, and

a requirement that staff ensure that visitors comply with infection-control policies.

The Minister also launched a regional dress-code policy for healthcare staff and recommendations for changing facilities. A point of concern to the public has been the wearing of uniforms outside hospitals by staff, particularly the perception that that practice increases the risk of infection. That matter has been discussed in the Health Committee and is of concern to its members.

The Minister asked for a review of Health Service sites that do not have adequate changing facilities, and new buildings, which will include changing facilities for staff, will be required fully to implement the review's recommendations. These measures form a picture of ministerial action — not inaction.

We should not underestimate the remit of the RQIA investigation into the Northern Trust. Its terms of reference include the circumstances contributing to the rates of *clostridium difficile* infection in the Northern Trust, including the recent outbreak; the trust's management and clinical response to *clostridium difficile* rates and the outbreak, including actions to inform patients, their relatives and the public; and the trust's arrangements to identify and notify the relevant people about cases, outbreaks and deaths that are associated with *clostridium difficile* infections. Other terms of reference are the trust's governance arrangements concerning, and the priority given to, the prevention and control of infection; the actions of the Northern Health and Social Services Board and the Department in relation to the management of the outbreak; and to identify lessons from that incident's management and make recommendations to the Northern Trust and the wider health and social care service.

The investigation will be carried out by experts from throughout the United Kingdom, and its terms of reference are evidence that the review will be comprehensive and will not pull any punches. When the report is published, we will be in a much better position to assess whether a public inquiry into those outbreaks is required.

It is a sad reality that we shall never be free from all hospital-acquired infections. The rise and spread of hospital-acquired infections affects us all, and, given the nature of infections' mutations and their growing resistance to antibiotics, we will be engaged in a constant battle to bring them under control. However, many things must, and can, be done, and I welcome the extra steps taken by the Minister to help achieve a reduction in infection rates. The matter is subject to the Health Minister's utmost attention, and I share his opinion that to launch a full public inquiry now would not be in patients' best interests.

A constant criticism of the new Executive has been that certain Ministers are afraid to take decisions and make changes; yet, in this instance, the Minister has been, and is, willing to take action, and he is aware that more must be done. The Assembly should get behind the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and support him in relation to this matter. Of course, his handling of the task must be scrutinised; however, it would be regrettable if an exercise in scoring political points — such as we heard from the Chairperson of the Health Committee — was undertaken in relation to this matter. Therefore, I ask all Members to support the Health Minister and the Ulster Unionist Party's amendment.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will not support the amendment.

Mr McCallister: Shame.

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, not shame. I thought that the Member for South Down Mr McCallister had actually been in Holland looking at trains, rather than at the Dromore by-election.

I will not support the amendment because, in light of the evidence presented to the Health Committee by the chief executives of each of the trusts and the Chief Medical Officer, there was unanimous agreement among the Committee members that it would be more prudent, and in the public's best interest, to call for a time-bound, full public inquiry.

Indeed, on 11 February, Mitchel McLaughlin asked a private notice question. There were two reasons for doing so: first, to discover details of the number of deaths across each of the health and social care trusts and, secondly, to ask the Minister what plans he had to authorise a full public inquiry. Members were told that there would be an internal investigation. However, as the Chairperson of the Health Committee said, since then, unfortunately, more people have lost their lives through hospital-acquired infections including *clostridium difficile*.

This issue is of huge public concern. Public confidence in hospitals and in healthcare facilities has been shaken, and the phrase "*clostridium difficile*" has been introduced into everyday language. When the subject of hospital-acquired infection is not on the TV, it is on the radio.

We often hear stories of how people have been affected personally. Members must do everything in their power to reduce the potential for further loss of life, although it is understood that this "superbug", as it is described, cannot be eradicated totally.

Let me be clear: Members are guided by the people they represent — those constituents and their families who have brought their concerns to our constituency offices. We are not guided by talk shows, and we will

not act as cheerleaders for any Minister on this issue, because it is far too important. This is not about party politics.

I drew attention to three cases in which constituents were being affected. They were older people who had waited very long periods for treatment in hospital, but who, when the time came, were afraid to go into hospital. One family member told me that they did not want to go into hospital and come out in a box. This is not party politics: it is the perception of my constituents, and it is their fear.

I have no doubt that we will hear about the costs of a public inquiry; but we need to factor in human costs and public perception. Staff morale in the Health Service is at an all-time low as a result of other issues. Sinn Féin does not want to get into finger-pointing or political point scoring over this: I want to make that clear.

We will hear about contributory factors such as the over-use of antibiotics and the high rates of bed-occupancy. The action plan to change the culture in the Health Service is to be welcomed — the Chairperson acknowledged that when the debate opened, and John McCallister agreed. The Minister's actions have been most welcome. However, Members are saying that those actions are not enough; which was unanimously agreed by the Health Committee. We ask the Minister to be decisive and introduce a full time-bound public inquiry to increase public confidence. That was discussed in Committee and with the chief executives of the various trusts.

Regardless of how many robust questions were asked by Committee members, we were left with the feeling that much more was to come and that much more needed to be done.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Very briefly.

Mr McCallister: I will be brief. Will the Member explain why her colleague Mitchel McLaughlin asked for an emergency meeting with the Northern Health and Social Care Trust but did not turn up for it? Furthermore, how can a public inquiry be time-bound?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I cannot answer for Mitchel McLaughlin, even though I am the party's Chief Whip. I thought the Member's intervention crass: it added nothing to the debate. It also reveals his lack of confidence and the weakness of his position. This is about people who are afraid to go into hospital: it is not about a Member's failure to turn up for a meeting with a trust.

However, Mr McCallister's point regarding a time-bound inquiry is valid. We will have to achieve agreement on that during the process. The public inquiry must be time-bound.

I support the call for a full, time-bound public inquiry, and I am disappointed and saddened that the House is divided on such an important issue. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mrs Hanna: I support the amendment.

Mrs I Robinson: Shame.

Mrs Hanna: Hospital healthcare-acquired —

Mrs I Robinson: So you were not at the meeting that decided unanimously?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. All remarks must be made through the Chair. There is a virus in the Chamber, and we need to get rid of it.

Mrs Hanna: I had not planned to explain my actions, but I will. During the Health Committee meeting on 14 February, I belatedly put my hand up to get the attention of the Chairperson to ask her whether we could discuss this issue. That is on the record. Now I will get back to the debate.

Healthcare-acquired infections concern the whole community, and we must all play our part in controlling and reducing them. A hospital is a place of refuge and healing. Patients should have the right to expect that, when they go into hospital to be made better, they should not have to concern themselves with picking up another infection, which might be far more serious, or even life threatening. A hospital is the very place in which patients should be with staff in whom they can place their trust.

Improvements and changes must be implemented urgently to convince us that acquired infection is a top priority, and that it is being addressed. Although we acknowledge that the staff work hard, they must find better ways of working. Great strides have been made at the high-tech end, which have resulted in better drugs for curing diseases, better quality of life and better healthcare generally. Therefore, people are living longer and there is a bigger and growing older population. That presents other challenges, and hospital leadership must remember that basic hygiene and attention to detail is still paramount and that patients are individual people. That is equally important.

I have worked as a staff nurse in all the hospitals in Belfast, and in other parts of Northern Ireland. I realise how hectic, busy and stressful that job can be, but people must still remember the details of basic hygiene. We must see the visible signs of change — enforced hand-washing, the education of the public in personal hygiene, and respect for hospitals. The Minister mentioned spot checks; those must be regular and monitored.

A major cause of acquired infections is resistance to antibiotics, and I know that a new policy on that has been established. Prescribing issues must involve all

prescribers, particularly GPs, who are probably the main prescribers.

As a member of the Health Committee, I regret that we did not have a full discussion on the proposal to hold a full public inquiry. The terms of reference, the costing and the timeline should have been discussed. I put my hand up and I asked whether the Committee could discuss those issues. I assume that a full public inquiry will mean that lawyers will be involved to represent parties. The Health Committee went through the health budget line by line, and rightly so. We should have thought through exactly what we want to get out of a public inquiry, and what can be learned from it. The motion proposes to hand the matter to the Minister to set the terms of reference for a public inquiry, but the Minister has already set terms of reference for a review.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Hanna: I am sorry. The Member will have another chance to speak later, and I do not have much time.

We know some of the answers. Antibiotic resistance is a 30-year problem, and we know that we have to learn from the experience of other places. We know that we are victims of our own success, and that we must change the culture. I hope that the Health Committee will meet the independent review team. I am impressed with the apparent calibre of the independent members of that team. A meeting would provide the Committee with more detail on the depth of the review and the details of the terms of reference.

As a community, we have not had a good experience of public inquiries. Indeed, I fear that when the Saville report is published next year, no one will be happy with it, except the lawyers. The last thing that I want to do is let the lawyers be the main beneficiaries of any monies that could go towards implementing some of those recommendations.

2.30 pm

I support the amendment because it adds more structure to the motion. I have an open mind about the call for a public inquiry; I am not opposed to the idea in principle. However, we have put the cart before the horse, and we should await the outcome of the review before considering calling for a public inquiry.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Chairperson of the Health Committee for bringing such an important issue to the House today.

For months, the headlines in the newspapers and on the television and radio have been full of horror stories about MRSA and clostridium difficile. I am extremely worried that if action is not taken — and taken soon — people will not go to hospital for fear of catching MRSA or clostridium difficile. That has already been

said. In particular, older people may be reluctant to go into hospital. That causes me, as someone who has championed the cause of older people, great concern. That situation must be avoided at all costs.

I will describe a slightly different case that happened recently, which has similarities in terms of fear. A young man from Northern Ireland called John Thompson was in America, but he did not have the correct papers. He was unwell and did not go to hospital, even though he knew that he should, because he was afraid of being deported. That is an example of the fear factor. Unfortunately, in this case, it cost that young man his life — John later died as he did not seek medical attention because of fear. We extend our sympathy to John's family on that sad loss. I hope that people here do not delay seeking medical treatment because of fear of catching a bug in hospital.

Last week, I was very concerned by the Conservative peer who made highly critical remarks about nurses and other hospital staff. Of course, that happened across the water. I believe that all staff in our Health Service do a brilliant job, but they are often constrained by rules and targets. In the House last Monday, my colleague David Ford highlighted the problem of hospital cleaners being employed at certain times only — usually between 9.00 am and 5.00 pm. However, people are admitted to hospital around the clock, and beds and wards need to be cleaned when one patient leaves and before another arrives. Something must be done to improve the situation, and if that means employing more cleaning staff, so be it.

Hospital staff are under pressure to meet waiting-list targets, and the resulting high patient turnover and bed occupancy does not allow for the sort of thorough cleaning that staff would like to carry out were they not under such immense pressure. The emphasis should always be on delivering the best possible care for patients, and not just on meeting Government targets.

We must do all that we can to end the outbreak of clostridium difficile. It is estimated that, in the long term, it costs between £4,000 and £10,000 more to treat a patient with an infection. It also estimated that the hospital stays of such patients are increased by between three and 10 days. Action must be taken, and taken now, to overcome the problem.

My party will support an inquiry into the outbreak, but only if it is a thorough and independent inquiry that covers all trusts, not just the Northern Trust, and only if it is concluded as quickly as possible. Indeed, more importantly, any recommendations flowing from such a report should be implemented immediately so that all patients can be protected without further delay.

To conclude, I appreciate the Minister's recent efforts to solve this particular crisis. However, time is

of the essence, and Members should support, as a matter of urgency, a public inquiry.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed, I welcome to the Assembly the members of the Constitutional Review Committee from Iraq, who are visiting Northern Ireland.

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion, and I congratulate the Chairperson of the Health Committee for securing this timely debate.

I have heard some cheap remarks in this House since power was devolved in May 2007; however, what I heard today takes the biscuit. It is outrageous for Carmel Hanna to say, more or less, that the Chairperson of the Health Committee has not given her an opportunity to speak in Committee.

Mrs Hanna: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am sorry, but I did not say that the Chairperson of the Health Committee did not allow me to speak.

Mr Buchanan: I remind Carmel that the Committee Clerk provides the Chairperson with the names of Committee members who wish to speak. Carmel said that she wanted more discussion on hospital-acquired infections before an inquiry be initiated. I wonder whether Carmel was asleep in Committee, because she has not taken into account all the evidence that the Committee received.

I state categorically that the DUP, for three reasons, will not support the amendment that stands in the names of John McCallister and Robert Coulter. First, the motion received the full support of the Committee, including Rev Robert Coulter, who, I assumed, was speaking on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. It is ironic that, for some unknown reason, that party has declined to support the motion in its entirety.

Secondly, the amendment simply calls on the Minister to:

“to consider initiating a full, independent public inquiry”

rather than:

“to initiate, as a matter of urgency, a full, independent and time-bound public inquiry.”

There is a distinct difference between considering something and initiating something. The Minister could consider the matter for years yet still do nothing about it, and that is not good enough. Action is required, especially given the concerns about the continual increase in hospital-acquired infections. That is why the motion has been tabled.

Thirdly, the amendment does not call for a time-bound inquiry. It would be open-ended and would permit an independent inquiry — if the Minister saw fit to initiate one — to run for years without reaching a conclusion. Again, given the current levels of infection in our

hospitals, that is unacceptable. I call on all Members to support the motion and reject the amendment.

Since 2001, there has been a continual increase in the number of deaths recorded as a direct result of hospital-acquired infections. Between 2001 and 2006, clostridium difficile was mentioned on 217 death certificates — 53% of which recorded it as being the underlying cause of death. Deaths caused by that infection increased from 63 in 2006 to 77 in 2007. Thirty of those deaths were recorded in the last three months of 2007.

We must ask ourselves what effect those deaths have had on public confidence. Public confidence in our hospitals is currently at an all-time low and needs to be restored urgently. People are afraid to go to hospital — whether for a check-up, for minor surgery or for something more serious — simply because they are afraid of catching an infection.

I know that the Minister announced an investment of £9 million and a comprehensive range of measures to tackle healthcare-associated infections. I also know that he set a target to reduce instances of clostridium difficile by 20% by March 2009. However, to put that in context, that would simply mean that the number of deaths would be reduced from 77 to 62 by March 2009.

Although that target is commendable, it does not offer much comfort to the families of elderly people who require hospital treatment. Such families are afraid to send their relatives to hospital in case they catch an infection.

Therefore, robust, strategic measures must be implemented urgently, not only to deal with the current outbreak of hospital-acquired infections, but to prevent further outbreaks. It is extremely important that anyone who is admitted to hospital does not have to worry about being at serious risk of catching an infection that could claim his or her life. Having listened to John McCallister, who does not want the independent inquiry to proceed, I can only assume that he is out of touch with people on the ground. Although the Committee cannot force the Minister to do anything, it is good practice for the Minister to listen to the Committee's concerns when they are put to him collectively.

I support the motion.

Mr Easton: It is rather disappointing that the amendment has been brought before the House through a coalition between the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists, with each party supporting the other in favour of it — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Easton: It is quite sad that the Ulster Unionists, who had supported the original proposal in the Committee, now support the amendment. However, it is clear that there is a split in their party on the issue.

The Minister has had to knock heads together and force his party colleagues to table an amendment. It is not surprising that they are split on the issue, because of the infighting that has taken place in their party and the fact that one of its members has recently joined Fianna Fáil.

Mr McCallister has been out partying when he should have been present at the Health Committee. That is no surprise, however, because instead of representing his supporters at the Health Committee, he has missed nine of its meetings. The fact that an Ulster Unionist has missed over half of the Committee's meetings shows what that party thinks of health.

There are few certainties in life. However, everyone is likely to end up in hospital at one time or another. There was a time when that prospect might have frightened people because of the state of medical knowledge and technology and because medical practitioners' abilities may have been less advanced than they are today. In those days, however, people had few fears about getting ill as result of going into hospital.

Hospitals were places where matrons wielded enormous power over all aspects of patient care and ruled their wards with great authority. They enjoyed enormous respect from doctors, patients and visitors alike. When someone entered hospital, that person felt that he or she was in a clean, germ-free environment. Patients felt that they were not only in safe hands, but in a safe place. The vast majority of hospital staff were directly involved in the treatment and care of patients. Their only target was to get patients well.

Sadly, those times are gone. Today, the first emotion that surfaces when someone learns that he or she must go to hospital is the fear that he or she might acquire a serious infection, such as MRSA or clostridium difficile. Old people, in particular, are afraid to go into hospital. Every Member knows of cases of people not seeking medical attention if it might involve an invasive procedure or an operation.

Recently, Members have had many opportunities to become more informed about hospital-acquired infections; their causes, treatment and the action that is taken to reduce their incidence and impact. However, the truth is that many people are frightened and look to the Assembly, to members of the Health Committee, to the Minister and to his Department for assurance that the problem is being dealt with as effectively as possible. They are not reassured by targets and statistics, or by reviews. They have come to regard reviews as a tactic that is used by Government Departments to, at best, postpone dealing with a problem and, at worst, to try to brush it under the carpet.

I have not been reassured by the description of a 20% reduction of clostridium difficile by 2009 as a challenging target. According to my reading of the

information that the Minister has given to Assembly, that would simply mean that figures for deaths that have occurred when clostridium difficile has been a factor would remain at around the same level for 2008. Therefore, instead of there being 77 deaths, there might, at best, be around 63. The man or woman in the street would not call that reassuring.

Mr McFarland: Will the Member give way?

Mr Easton: No, I will not give way.

People have not been reassured by the manner in which statistical information has been so clumsily made available — the drip-feed nature of the supply of that information, and the time that has been taken to get an understanding of the scale of the problem. Their impression is that trusts work in isolation and not in a co-ordinated and effective manner.

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that many people, myself included, are concerned at the complacency of the Minister's response to the public's need for reassurance and at the way that he has wrongly limited the review solely to the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

2.45 pm

Members are here to serve the people of Northern Ireland. The people who raise questions on the issue with their elected representatives on a daily basis want answers and reassurance that any review will not have a focus that is so narrow that appropriate comparisons will not be allowed to be made across all trusts and hospitals in Northern Ireland. For those reasons, I join my colleagues in calling on the Health Minister to initiate urgently a full, independent and time-bound inquiry across all the health and social care trusts in order that we can have the answers to the critical questions that have arisen because of the incidences of life-threatening hospital-acquired infections.

The motion had the unanimous support of the Committee; it is unfortunate that the Ulster Unionist Party has now split the Committee —

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

Mr Easton: I support the motion.

Dr McDonnell: I am glad that I can add a few brief comments. We have lost all sense of proportion, which is why I am speaking in the debate.

There is an issue in our hospitals that must be dealt with. As the Member for West Tyrone Mr Buchanan has stated that, public confidence in some of our hospitals is low. However, it is a matter of opinion whether that low public confidence is because of genuine fears or whether it is the result of childish political games such as those that are being played this afternoon. Such behaviour makes a cheap football out of peoples' lives. We should not —

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Dr McDonnell: No; the Member has caused enough damage already this afternoon.

We must tackle all hospital-acquired infections, of which *Clostridium difficile* is just one, so that patients are not terrified of dying in hospital from diseases that they have acquired in hospital — be they MRSA, *Clostridium difficile* or something else. Our older people are fearful, and that is why there is an onus on us to act. Some of that fear may be justified, but much of it is hysteria that has been created by people who should know better.

I do not want to be drawn into the public anxiety on the issue, and I refuse to add to it: the health of the public is too important. If the DUP is genuinely concerned about the public's health, it should not make a political football of it. We must be clean, clear, honest and open about the issue. This is not a party political issue; it is an issue that affects every one of us.

Mrs I Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it right that the Member is saying that this is a DUP-led debate, when I, as Chairperson of Committee, am doing what was agreed by all members — and parties — on the Committee? Is the Member allowed to state that the motion is my political football, when I am representing the unanimous will of the Committee?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is the cut and thrust of politics. However, I will refer the point of order to the Speaker, who will reply to you.

Dr McDonnell: I do not want to debate how the Health Committee is chaired or how it works; however, the information that I have received from my colleague here — and others — suggests that there should be courses that coach people in how to act as chairmen.

Mrs Hanna: I did not say that.

Dr McDonnell: Yes. When a Member is made the Chairperson of a Committee, there is an onus on him or her to chair that Committee impartially. This is one such issue that should not be debated in a partisan manner. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs I Robinson: Is it right for any Member to cast aspersions on the capacity of a Chairman to behave in a neutral fashion? I never give preferential treatment to anyone in a Committee — never — nor have there been any such complaints. Today's criticism is from gutless wonders who would not speak out at meetings of the Committee.

Mr Deputy Speaker: All Members must be careful about what they say to one another. Everything that is

said is recorded in Hansard, and no doubt it can be read. Please continue, Dr McDonnell.

Dr McDonnell: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Such irrational and emotional behaviour is entirely inappropriate for this debate.

My point is that a review is under way, and Members should be fully informed of its findings before any further investigation is carried out. We should analyse the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) report before taking any further action. Perhaps no further action will be necessary because the report may tell us everything that we need to know — in fact, I worry that we may discover some things that we would rather not know about.

A fair amount of consultation has taken place, and it would be difficult to justify a massive public inquiry in addition to the current review while hospitals need money for cleaners. The thousands of pounds that an inquiry would cost would be misspent, as far as elderly people, others who are not so elderly and their families are concerned.

Furthermore, a public inquiry would be likely to freeze any serious engagement with the problem because, in the course of the inquiry, little could be done to address the issue. I do not want the issue to drag out — I want it to be tackled tomorrow, and I urge the Minister to take all necessary steps to enable that to happen. Members must deal with the problem, rather than generate hot air. An inquiry will not make hospitals any cleaner, more sterile or more hygienic. The only way to achieve cleaner and safer hospitals is to ensure that all necessary resources are available to deliver the highest standard of hygiene. More action is required; not more talk.

Mr G Robinson: I congratulate the Chairperson of the Health Committee on bringing this important motion before the House. This debate offers the opportunity to seek an agreed way forward, rather than to seek to score political points, as has happened during the last few contributions by Ulster Unionist and SDLP Members.

Every MLA is focused on reducing the number of hospital-acquired infections, and my particular target is the examination of the process used in cleaning hospitals. I appreciate that many other serious and important health issues must be addressed.

Will the Minister consider retuning the responsibility for requesting that specific areas be cleaned to the nursing staff on the ward? I have heard reports of nursing staff being unable to secure the co-operation of contracted cleaning staff when the inevitable spills on wards have to be cleared up. It is common sense that an increase in the co-operation between nursing and

cleaning staff will reduce hospital-acquired infection to a less shocking level.

Will the Minister also consider the return of in-house cleaning staff to hospitals? The direct line of responsibility would make the eradication and control of infections such as MRSA and *clostridium difficile* easier. That may seem to be a small change, but it would be of great benefit in the fight against hospital-acquired infections.

The Minister may consider my next point to be petty, but does he not agree that the cleaning of defined areas, such as toilets, ward floors, shower rooms and public areas should be made the responsibility of dedicated teams who would do nothing else? I have heard that the same equipment has been used to clean more than one of those areas. That is madness, and possibly contributes to the spread of infection in the wards. It also means that if a complaint is received, a team or individuals can be identified and training can be given.

Each and every one of us wishes to ensure the safety of the patients in our hospitals. Sometimes we must look to the past to get a few pointers for the future. Many of us believe that we must look back to the days when hospital cleaning was done in-house. There was a clear and definitive line of responsibility, and, in most cases, cleaning appeared to be carried out to a much higher standard. In order to move forward fully and fight the high level of hospital-acquired infection, we must get the basic cleanliness of hospitals right. I have great pleasure in supporting the motion.

Mr Shannon: There can be little doubt that nothing causes as much fear to many people as the thought of a stay in hospital. No one likes to be away from family, no matter how short that stay may be. No one likes the thought of being poked or prodded, and no one likes the needles and the pills. That is the way that it has always been. People had a fear of what could happen or of what they might be carrying. However, that fear has deepened and increased over the past few years, and now people fear that they may come out of hospital more unwell than when they were admitted.

People are afraid of picking up hospital-acquired infections, such as MRSA or a super strain of a bug that will leave them with disabilities, possibly for the rest of their life. Many people are worried sick — literally — about *clostridium difficile*.

I asked the Minister a question for written answer — and what I have to say is not an attack on him. We are all looking for an inquiry to put at ease the concerns of the people that we represent. In my question, I asked the Minister to detail the number of outbreaks of MRSA and in which hospitals those outbreaks had occurred. I was startled by the answer: the Ulster Hospital had 34 cases in 2004, 25 in 2005, and 37 in 2006. The Minister assured me that there

was a target to reduce infection rates by 10% by 31 March 2009.

Quhan ye yairn wi' onie o' the fowk wha wrocht aa the Ulster Hospital an see the nummer o' inpatient cairds at hae MRSA writ across the tap o' thaim hit's clear tae see at MRSA hasnae gane awa', at monie o' oor aulder fowk wul bae seekened bae this infection fer the rest o' thair days efter pickin' hit ap an' this cannae bae let gae oan. Quhan ye visit fowk i hospital ye're fit tae see the efforts tae stap infection i the rid han' wasch pumps ootby ivry bay, hoo'iniver fer ivry boadie at uises thaim afore an efter thair visit anither 5 fowk dinnae an, tae me, hit's clear at thair maun bae a concerted public campaign aboot uisin' thae wasches quhan aa the hospital.

From speaking to staff at the Ulster Hospital, or observing the number of inpatient cards with MRSA written across the top, it is clear that MRSA has not gone away. Many of our elderly people will be plagued by the infection for the rest of their lives after picking it up in hospital. That situation cannot continue. There are tangible efforts to reduce infection by encouraging visitors to use the red hand-wash pumps outside each bay. However, for every person who uses the hand wash before and after a visit, another five people do not. There must be a concerted campaign to draw the matter to the public's attention.

That is why a public inquiry must be carried out independently, so that when people visit their loved ones they are not unwittingly making matters worse. The motion was not tabled to score points. We are here because of our constituents. The Member for North Belfast, the Chairperson of the Committee and every other Member who spoke are all clear about the issues. I know of people in my area who are afraid to go into hospital. I am making that point because I represent my people — as I should do, and as everyone in the Chamber should do. Some people in my constituency decided not to go into hospital for operations because they were worried about catching the bug. As elected representatives, we cannot ignore that fact.

The hospital bug *clostridium difficile* is similar to MRSA in the way that it is spread, and it should be on a downward trend. However, it is not. It was listed on 77 death certificates in Northern Ireland in the past year. That figure, which was revealed by the Minister's Department, shows a rise of 14 from 2006. Again, the facts are clear. There were 10 recorded cases in the Ulster Hospital alone, and three people died between September and December 2007. Province wide, 30 people died from the bug. Those are the facts — they are not made up, and we cannot ignore them.

3.00 pm

The statistics are repeated over and over again, and that is why we need an inquiry. My colleague Simon

Hamilton and I had a meeting with John Compton just a few weeks ago, and he told us that 30% of elderly people and 3% of young people carry the clostridium difficile bug. Many people carry the bug, and something can trigger it off. More often than not, that happens when people go to hospital.

A healthcare professional — a young lady, by the way — told me that she wants to see matrons back in hospitals, along with a regime where people scrub themselves before visiting hospitals, where the halls smell clean with disinfectant. I understand that there is no quick-fix solution; however, I believe that theories must be translated into action, and now is the time for that to be done. The motion will end some people's fear of going into hospital, and for that reason I support it. For the sake of people having operations, now is the time to begin the process. I support the motion.

Mr McFarland: This has been a chippy debate, which has not been helped by the Committee Chairperson's history of politicking in the Committee, and in the House today. We all know that hospital-acquired infections have been increasing for some time, and the reason for that is directly related to antibiotics. There is, therefore, an issue with antibiotics; furthermore — as has been well documented in the House — there is an issue of cleaning and cleanliness in hospitals.

However, the problem centres around the elderly, who have weak immune systems, and are much more susceptible to microbes. No one can be in any doubt of the seriousness of the issue, it has been discussed on 'The Stephen Nolan Show' and in the House, so everyone knows what the issues are. No one is more aware of them than the Minister. The Minister has taken action. You may have a go at him in the Committee, but he has taken action. He has organised a whole system for cleaning in hospitals that he has already explained to the House. The Minister has now set up a Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority inquiry to investigate the problem, so that a timely solution can be found and action can be taken now. The Committee will no doubt have looked at the inquiry's terms of reference, which are extensive.

Public inquiries in Northern Ireland take quite a long time to set up, cost a fortune, and probably involve lawyers. It could be argued that there is not enough time for all of that to happen. The Members who have spoken so far are right that there is clearly a public-confidence issue here — people are scared about going into hospitals, and we are trying to solve that by taking timely action. I urge the House to call on the Minister to get on with that, as he has done, and to get on with his inquiry, as he is doing, to produce a solution that does not cost a fortune and that is done in time. A public inquiry is not going to do that. I support the amendment.

Dr Deeny: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak on this important issue. I was somewhat saddened by the debate. Sometimes it is good not to belong to one of the main parties, because this debate has been reduced to a bickering exercise between parties, and that should not be the case.

Cáral ní Chuilín quite rightly said that we are guided by our people, and I, as a GP, am guided by my patients. The situation is not new from a medical perspective, but it is an increasingly serious situation in our hospitals. I want to state at the outset that what may be a cheaper or a quicker method of doing something is never the right way of doing the job, particularly when it concerns human lives.

I have to speak up for the Health Committee Chairperson, as she has been most impartial in the Committee, and it is unacceptable for my fellow GP to make such comments about her today. Each member of the Committee gets a fair share, and I am sure that his fellow party Members did not indicate otherwise to him: I would not believe it of them. All members of the Health Committee have had a fair chance to make a contribution and have been working well together, and I would like to make that public today.

We are advocates for our people, and we must speak up. As has been discussed in the Committee, our job and our duty is to restore public confidence, which is at an all-time low, in our hospitals. I see it still in practice.

The word "review" is far too mellow and shallow; an inquiry is needed. This issue concerns human lives. The Hansard report of the Committee evidence session on 11 October 2007 states that I asked the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority about its powers of enforcement. For those Members who do not know — I am sure that my GP colleague knows — the RQIA is an agency of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The RQIA told me that, although it had powers for the regulated sector, its powers of enforcement were limited for statutory bodies. I have worked with the RQIA; it dealt with a nursing home in my area very effectively. However, at that evidence session, the RQIA explained that it could not hold the Department to account. Therefore, the RQIA is an in-house body.

Patients in my area are hearing, for the first time, about evidence of clostridium difficile in the west, in addition to Belfast and elsewhere. Those people will want the inquiry to cover all of Northern Ireland, not just one trust area.

Mrs I Robinson: Hear, hear.

Dr Deeny: Do we have to wait until there is an outbreak or a disaster before we have a Northern Ireland-wide inquiry? Of course we do not. The Minister has mentioned the RQIA; I want to know who the members are and when the review team will report.

The limited power of an in-house review of only one trust will certainly not restore public confidence in our hospitals. I reiterate what my colleague the Member for West Tyrone said about the amendment: I was shocked to see it on the Marshalled List this morning. The Committee agreed the issue last Thursday, and I believed that it was unanimous. To see the word “consider” in the amendment shocked me: I underlined it in red. Our two colleagues from the Ulster Unionist Party are not prepared to ask the Minister to initiate a review, only to ask him to consider it. The issue is far too serious only to consider initiating an inquiry.

The introduction of unannounced spot checks is to be welcomed. Will the Minister give us some details about them? Who will carry them out? Will they be independent? How often will they occur? Will they be announced quickly?

I also want to ask about whistle-blowing. The Minister and the Department must issue a statement about Health Service personnel, whether relating to the poor performance of a health professional, a procedural matter or an issue about hygiene in hospitals —

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

Dr Deeny: Health Service staff must be encouraged to speak out, without fear of punishment. I support the motion and reject the amendment.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The battle against so-called superbugs such as clostridium difficile and MRSA is a challenge that we all face. Reducing and preventing the spread of healthcare-associated infections requires the full co-operation of staff, patients and the general public. Health trusts have a responsibility to ensure that their facilities are clean and that staff comply with proper hand-hygiene measures. The public also has a responsibility to comply with visiting restrictions and to follow good hygiene practices when in hospitals. Those measures will all make a difference; they will help to reduce the spread of infections, but they will never fully eradicate infections from our hospitals. That is not possible.

Preventing and reducing healthcare-associated infections is a major priority. I know that infections such as clostridium difficile are a cause of great concern for patients and the public. They are also a great concern for Health Service staff, who make every effort to stop their spread, as well as for me as the Minister. I am fully committed to doing everything in my power to reduce those infections.

Those infections can have a significant impact on patients and their families, and they have shaken public confidence in the Health Service. The current

outbreak of the virulent 027 strain of clostridium difficile in the Northern Trust area has been particularly distressing for all those who have been affected. It has been made all the more distressing given that so many of those people who have contracted clostridium difficile have been seriously ill already, and, in most cases, they have been elderly. Tragically, several people who have contracted clostridium difficile have died, and I want to extend my deep sympathies to all those who have lost a loved one.

The ethos of our Health Service is about helping people to get better. It is about cradle-to-the-grave care that is free at the point of contact. It is about providing the best treatment and support to patients and their families. At the start of the twentieth century, childhood infections such as measles and whooping cough were rife, and thousands died each year of those and other diseases of poverty, including TB. Those days are gone, thanks to improvements in the general standard of living and advances in modern medicine, such as immunisation and antibiotics. However, we continue to face challenges such as the healthcare-associated infections that we are debating. Northern Ireland is by no means unique in having to face that problem. Only last week, we saw newspaper headlines in England and Wales about a rise of over 70% in deaths caused by clostridium difficile. Although Northern Ireland has the lowest rate of healthcare-associated infections in the UK — 5.5% — that does not mean that we can become complacent, and we do not want people in our hospitals to pick up avoidable infections. However, it is important to put this into context: each year, 700,000 people attend accident and emergency units, 500,000 inpatients and day-cases are treated, and one and a half million people attend outpatient appointments.

As I have stated already, I am committed to tackling healthcare-associated infections. Unfortunately, we will never be able to eradicate them fully, given that 70% of the elderly population and 3% of the adult population carry clostridium difficile in their bowel. However, by following robust infection-control measures, it is possible to reduce such infections. Five main control measures, rigorously applied, will help to reduce clostridium difficile: the prudent use of antibiotics; hand hygiene; environmental cleaning; isolation and cohort nursing; and the use of personal protective equipment by healthcare staff.

Since I took up my post last year, I have introduced a comprehensive range of measures aimed at driving down infection rates. Last September, I set targets to reduce the number of cases of clostridium difficile by 20%, and MRSA by 10%, by March 2009. On 1 January, I announced an additional investment of £9 million for clean and safer care in healthcare facilities. New initiatives included: unannounced hygiene

inspections of hospitals; additional pharmacists in trusts to promote the safer prescribing of antibiotics; a new regional dress policy; consultation on hospital visiting policies; rapid-response cleaning teams in hospitals; the quarterly publication of trusts' infection-control performances; a regional hand-hygiene campaign; and single rooms for new hospitals, with the aim of improving hygiene. Those initiatives are in addition to the measures that are under way already, including: the Changing the Culture action plan, which focuses on improved surveillance, education and training and which contains 37 actions; the ward sisters' charter, which puts ward sisters in charge of cleanliness in their wards; the development of a regional infection control manual; and one million copies of leaflets on infection control for the public and visitors.

Only yesterday, I announced the outcome of the second environmental cleanliness audit. Members and the public should take great confidence from that report, as it has shown a significant improvement in the environmental cleanliness of the majority of our hospitals. I want to thank staff for all their efforts in striving to make hospitals clean for patients and the public.

3.15 pm

I fully understand Members' concerns about the current outbreak of *clostridium difficile* and their desire to hold a public inquiry. I have given the matter careful consideration and taken advice from my Chief Medical Officer. I understand why Carál feels that she should be guided by her constituents. However, as the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I cannot do that, and I must be guided by the Chief Medical Officer, medical professionals and infection-control staff in the Health Service. I have never ruled out a public inquiry. My first priority, however, is to ensure that this outbreak is contained quickly and that trusts are taking all the necessary action to try to reduce the levels of *clostridium difficile*.

All Members have a common objective of wanting to make our Health Service work. I am sure that Members will agree that we cannot deflect staff from their essential work in trying to reduce and control infections; to do so would detract from the paramount priority, which is patient safety. The health and safety of our patients, and the ability of our staff to carry out their work, must be our first priority. I visited Antrim Area Hospital and have been keeping a close eye on the measures that are being taken to contain the current outbreak. The number of new cases is falling, and I am encouraged by the continuing efforts and professionalism of the staff at the hospital to try to control this outbreak. I have spoken to all five trust chief executives to ensure that there is no complacency and that efforts are redoubled across the Health Service to deal with *clostridium difficile* and other infections.

As Minister, I have a duty to ensure that my actions are appropriate, timely and responsible. I also want to ensure that lessons are learned quickly and are shared across the Health Service, which is why I announced an independent review, led by the RQIA, into the *clostridium difficile* outbreak in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area. That review will be rigorous and comprehensive; its terms of reference are broad and will ensure that every aspect of the outbreak will be investigated thoroughly so that any shortcomings are identified and the necessary lessons learned. Later in the year, the review will be complemented by a comprehensive assessment of the progress made across Northern Ireland in all trusts to achieve the goals and targets of the Changing the Culture action plan.

The terms of reference are: to review the circumstances contributing to the rates of *clostridium difficile* infection in the Northern Trust in 2007-08, including the recent outbreak; to review the trust management and clinical response to its *clostridium difficile* rates and outbreak, including actions to inform patients, their relatives and the public; to review the trust's arrangements to identify and notify cases, outbreaks and deaths associated with *clostridium difficile* infection; to review the trust's governance arrangements and the priority given to the prevention and control of infection; to review the actions of the Northern Health and Social Services Board and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to the management of the outbreak and wider actions to help to reduce *clostridium difficile* rates in other trusts; to examine any other relevant matters that emerge during the review; and to identify learning from the management of this incident and make recommendations for the Northern Trust and the wider health and social care system.

The review team is made up of leading experts in infection control from across the UK. Those experts will have the power and authority that they need to investigate the outbreak thoroughly. What is more, they have already started to work by examining actions being taken by other trusts to try to prevent possible further outbreaks and check whether their current infection-control processes are robust. The review team will investigate the Northern Trust outbreak as soon as it has been contained.

The investigation will be speedy, without compromising its rigour or thoroughness. I have asked the RQIA to complete the investigation, and report back to me, within 12 weeks — by the end of May. That will allow me to ensure that immediate action can be taken, and I can also decide whether a public inquiry is warranted. The motion calls for a time-bound inquiry; as Minister, I can set a target for completion, but experience suggests that an extension is often sought and granted. I doubt whether it is

possible to complete a public inquiry in 12 months, let alone 12 weeks.

Both the human organs inquiry and the inquiry into hyponatraemia-related deaths exceeded 12 months, and the latter still has substantial work to do. Those are the only public inquiries established by my Department in the last 10 years. Those are the important and necessary inquiries, and I am hopeful that the inquiry into hyponatraemia-related deaths will resume its work shortly.

It is a well-established principle both here and in the rest of the UK that inquiries are called only in exceptional circumstances in which no other investigatory mechanism would be sufficient. That is by no means to rule out a public inquiry, and I am still minded to carry out one. First, however, I want the independent review to progress its work urgently and to get assurances that the trusts are doing what they should be doing to reduce and control infection, that there is no delay in identifying the lessons from that outbreak and that there is no delay in trusts making any changes needed to address those lessons. Ultimately, I want to ensure that we work quickly to prevent putting patients at risk of further infections.

There are clear and compelling reasons for proceeding as I have done in commissioning the RQIA investigation. That review will report back its findings urgently, ensuring that the Health Service can respond rapidly. Public confidence in the Health Service must be restored and restored quickly. Modern medicine has brought huge benefits to the population; we are now able to treat and cure more people than ever before, thanks to advances in medicine and specialist drugs. We must never forget that the overwhelming majority of patients who enter our hospitals receive high-quality care and treatment. Tackling superbugs is everyone's responsibility — patients, the public and healthcare staff all have a part to play.

For my part, I will continue to take every action to ensure the prevention, early detection and reduction of these infections and to ensure that cleaner and safer care is the guiding principle for the Health Service.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I rise with a heavy heart, having listened to some of the chief comments that have been made earlier. We are dealing with people's lives, with their health and happiness, so it is a sad commentary on the quality of the speeches in this House that we have had to listen to some of those remarks today.

I want to make it clear that I will not allow anyone, including the Minister, to tell me what to do. When I, along with my colleague, tabled the amendment to the motion, I did so honestly because I felt that it strengthened the position. Are we to have two inquiries running at the same time? Surely that makes a laughing stock of our supposed professionalism.

Mrs I Robinson: Why did the Member not say that at the time? At the Committee he agreed that we should ask for a full, independent and time-limited public inquiry.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I have not ruled that out, and neither has the Minister. Did he not say that he was not ruling out a public inquiry? Take the wax out of your ears.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members again to be extremely careful of what they say to one another.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I am glad that you said that, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise if the Chairperson of the Health Committee has no wax in her ears.

Mrs I Robinson: I clean them every day.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Thank you. It is good to know that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. There is a vaccine available if there is disorder in the Chamber. It is Standing Order 60, and I do not want to have to use it. Members, please take notice of what I have said.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: If we are to have an in-depth examination of the problem by the RQIA, surely it is better to let that organisation carry out its inquiry and then, if need be, have a full and independent public inquiry.

Would it not benefit the full public inquiry to be able to draw on the RQIA's decisions? Were the inquiry to do that, we could proceed step by step, as we should do. Moreover, as far as immediacy is concerned, has not the Minister said that the RQIA's work will be finished in 12 weeks? How much quicker is that than to have a public inquiry that could last 12 months?

The amendment represents the way forward. Therefore, I take pleasure in commending the amendment to the House.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

(Mrs O'Neill): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend my colleagues on the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for bringing the motion to the House. I thank those Members who contributed to the debate, and I thank the Minister for responding. However, I am disappointed that certain Members, and certain parties, felt the need to move the debate's focus to point scoring and personal attacks. That is not good enough.

Several Members spoke with passion and emotion. Hospital-acquired infections is certainly a massive public-confidence issue, and we must work at restoring the public's confidence in the Health Service.

It is fitting that the call for a public inquiry into the outbreak of *Clostridium difficile* should have the full

weight of the Health Committee behind it. We thought that that was the case; however, it was Members who supported the motion in Committee who tabled the amendment to it.

In proposing the motion, the Chairperson of the Health Committee set out the latest figures on cases of *clostridium difficile*, and the number of deaths linked to the infection over the first six weeks of 2008. I remind Members of those stark figures: 194 cases of *clostridium difficile* and 24 deaths in which *clostridium difficile* was either the cause of death or a contributory factor.

Much of the media attention is focused on an outbreak in the final quarter of 2007 in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area. However, it is clear that that outbreak is not yet under control, and that makes it very difficult to begin to rebuild public confidence.

The Committee Chairperson and other Members, including Carál Ní Chuilín, Thomas Buchanan, Dr McDonnell, Jim Shannon, Alan McFarland and Dr Deeny, pointed out that public confidence has been dealt a major blow from which it will take time to recover.

Several Members referred to a report on hospital cleanliness that was published yesterday. That report states that environmental cleanliness in our hospitals has improved. It is the second such report, and it shows that 13 out of 18 acute hospitals have improved on their scores. Although that is welcome news, it masks some real problems.

Hospitals are banded according to their scores, and it is disappointing that only four hospitals are in band 1, which merits the following description:

“Reflects high standards of environmental cleanliness with only a few instances where environmental cleanliness is below standard.”

Thirteen hospitals are in band 2, with the following assessment:

“Environmental cleanliness standards in hospitals were generally satisfactory but there is room for improvement.”

One hospital was in band 4, for which the assessment is:

“Hospitals in this band are likely to have significant problems with their cleaning services and maintenance issues may compound this.”

The public have a right to expect nothing but the highest standards of cleanliness in our hospitals, and incidents such as the outbreak of *clostridium difficile* highlight the real dangers of not maintaining those standards.

John McCallister said that it is on record that the Minister is not opposed to an inquiry, and that the Committee is pushing at an open door. However, that begs the question: why was it necessary to table an amendment to the motion?

Carál Ní Chuilín said that the Committee unanimously agreed that a full public inquiry would be in the public interest. She spoke of the huge issue of public concern and lack of confidence in healthcare facilities. She also said that the human cost and public perception of infection must be taken into account.

Kieran McCarthy spoke of horror-story headlines about MRSA and *clostridium difficile*. He said that older people are increasingly reluctant to go into hospital, a situation that must be avoided at all costs. He also mentioned reports that cleaners are employed to work from nine-to-five only, while patients are admitted to hospitals 24/7.

3.30 pm

Carmel Hanna welcomed the improvements and changes that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety introduced and said that they must be implemented urgently. She recognised that the high end of the Health Service is getting better through improved drugs and technology, but she also emphasised that people are living longer. She reiterated the importance of people remembering the basics of cleanliness.

Thomas Buchanan gave three reasons for his opposition to the amendment: first, the motion had the full support of the Health Committee; secondly, the amendment calls on the Minister to merely “consider” initiating a public inquiry, which is not strong enough; and thirdly, the inquiry requested by the amendment is not time bound.

Dr Alasdair McDonnell spoke of the need to deal with public confidence and of the necessity to tackle other hospital-acquired infections besides *clostridium difficile*. George Robinson said that the cleaning of healthcare facilities should be done in-house again, because it gives a direct line of responsibility. He also said that responsibility for cleaning certain areas should be given to nursing staff, and he stated that the cleaning of such areas as toilets, washrooms and shower-room facilities should be carried out by dedicated teams so that the risk of cross-infection is reduced.

Alex Easton said that hospitals used to be clean environments but are now institutions to which people fear having to go. He said that some people avoid going into hospital for essential treatment. He also said that people are not reassured by reviews and targets: rather, they are seeking specific reassurances, and the motion is a step towards providing that assurance.

Jim Shannon highlighted the seriousness of *clostridium difficile* and other infections, and he also reminded the House that MRSA has not disappeared, despite the current focus on *clostridium difficile*. He spoke of the importance of hand washing and said that many people did not wash their hands. He also said that a campaign to ensure that people are educated on the importance of hand washing was required.

Dr Deeny said that the RQIA review is shallow and limited in its powers and is an in-house publication — hence the need for a full independent inquiry. He spoke of the need for more details on spot checks, and he called for a statement on whistle-blowing from the Minister.

Alan McFarland stated that the Minister has taken action to improve cleanliness and has instigated the RQIA review. I do not dispute that; the Minister's work to date is welcome, but we need more.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to eradicate hospital-acquired infection as far as possible. However, the best way to do that is by initiating a full independent inquiry. The Minister spoke of a common objective and said that patient safety must be our first priority. The Committee shares that objective, and we need the Minister to work with us in trying to restore public confidence and safety. I repeat: that a full public inquiry is the best way to do that.

With regard to the amendment, originally the Minister set his face against a full public inquiry, but, following the Committee's unanimous decision on the matter, he changed his mind and said that he was minded to have an inquiry following the publication of the RQIA review. I welcome his change of heart, but the amendment dilutes that minded approach and decision and merely asks him to "consider" such an inquiry following the review. I will, therefore, oppose the amendment, and I call on the Minister to give a firm commitment to set up a public inquiry as soon as possible.

The chief executives of the trusts and the Chief Medical Officer made much of the comparisons with other jurisdictions when they attended a meeting of the Health Committee a couple of weeks ago. They informed the Committee that, notwithstanding the current outbreak of *clostridium difficile* in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, infection rates in our hospitals are low by international standards. The Chief Medical Officer said that dealing with the issue was a global challenge, and he put our situation into context by informing the Committee that between 5% and 10% of patients across the world contract healthcare-associated infections.

The most recent figures for the North show that 5.4% of patients contracted healthcare-associated infections in 2006, compared with 8.2% in England. Recent figures published in England show that *clostridium difficile* killed or hastened the death of almost 6,500 patients in 2006 — a 72% increase on the previous year. Although that may be the case, it is little consolation to those who are affected by the infection, and it does little to reassure anyone who is worried about going into hospital.

In fact, it only adds to their concern. The trusts here were clearly unprepared for the outbreak of *clostridium difficile*, so lessons must be learned for the future.

In conclusion, the Committee believes that the only way in which we can learn those lessons and begin to restore public confidence in the Health Service is by having a full, independent inquiry. I call on Members to support the motion.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 29; Noes 51.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr McNarry, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Mr K Robinson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Gardiner and Mr McCallister.

NOES

Mr Adams, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Dr Deeny, Mr Dodds, Mr Doherty, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mrs Foster, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Miss McIlveen, Mr Molloy, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Wells, Mr B Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Easton and Miss McIlveen.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly, following the number of deaths associated with hospital acquired infections from 2001 to date, calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to initiate, as a matter of urgency, a full, independent and time-bound public inquiry.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Youth Services Budget

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

One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to wind up.

Mr S Wilson: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the eight per cent reduction of the Youth Services budget for the year 2008-09; calls on the Minister of Education to redirect resources from within her budget to make good the cuts; and believes that Youth Services would have greater long term security with local councils, after the Review of Public Administration.

I am pleased that this debate has come before the Assembly. I did not dare leave this place today in case I was caught up in a traffic jam — I knew that I would never survive a second occasion on which a motion did not reach the Floor.

I tabled the motion because, along with all other Members who deal with youth organisations, either in their constituencies or generally across the whole of Northern Ireland, I genuinely believe that the Youth Service does a sterling job, in all its various forms — voluntary groups, uniformed groups, unattached youth workers — right across the spectrum of youth provision. It does so not only with difficult youngsters — youngsters who have difficulties and are at risk, but with many other young people, by giving them leadership and character-building opportunities, helping them and diverting them into a wide range of activities.

In Northern Ireland, some 180,000 young people benefit from Youth Service provision and more than 20,000 people give of their time voluntarily, along with paid workers, to ensure that there is provision right across the Province. The Youth Service makes a vital contribution to society.

I am concerned for the immediate prospects of the Youth Service as a result of the budget that the Minister of Education has presented to the Assembly. Although she has restored some of the money that was originally cut, it is the only area in the Education budget where there was not just a cut in real terms, but a cut in the figure allocated over the next three years. The Minister has restored some of that money, so that there is no longer a cut in the figure allocated. There is, nevertheless, a cut in real terms over the next three years. The increase for this year is 2.2%; for next year,

1.2%; and in the third year, 0.4% — all of which are cuts in real terms. The cut in real terms gets bigger every year, so the Youth Service faces a declining budget in real terms.

Despite her protestations, the Minister has shown that she and her Department do not value the Youth Service in the way in which many Members want it valued. The Minister, in her response to the draft Budget, and after she had made a cut in money, said that the Youth Service's role in the personal and social development of young people was well-recognised. If that is good recognition, it is perfectly legitimate to ask what poor recognition would be like. The Youth Service has become the Cinderella of the Department of Education.

The amendment calls for more money to be put into the Youth Service budget, but there are several areas from which the Minister could have got that money. She will sigh at this, but we all know the amount of money that she has poured into opening schools, with 12 youngsters in them, in the Irish-medium and integrated sectors. That has cost millions of pounds.

The amount of money that the Department spends on consultancy must also be considered. Was any attempt made to reduce that? Was any attempt made to reduce the amount of money that the Department spends on public relations? There is a whole host of places in which the Minister could have found money. We are not talking about hundreds of millions of pounds; a few million pounds over the next three years would have at least restored the budget in real terms to what it was. That small amount of money could have been found; but was not.

I have a short-term concern that the Youth Service is not safe in the Department of Education. In the hands of the Minister, the Youth Service is not being given the provision that it ought to be given. I have a longer-term concern —

Mr Elliott: Does the Member believe that any part of the education system is safe in the Minister's hands?

Mr S Wilson: I do not want to get into that area: there have been enough comments about that. I will stick to talking about the Youth Service, but the Member's question illustrates the problem that it has not been given priority.

In the longer term, as we move towards the possibility of having a single education and skills authority (ESA), the Youth Service is being thrown in with a mishmash of other functions. In fact, it seems that one of the eight sections, or directorates, of the ESA, will encapsulate around 16 different functions, few of them related; and it is into that section that the Youth Service is being thrown.

There are even graver concerns about the long-term future of the Youth Service, and that is the reason for the second part of my motion — that the Youth Service should become the responsibility of local councils. I have several reasons for that. First, the Youth Service is essentially a local service. I recognise that there are regional bodies.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member clarify his position on the fact that there are organisations that work at the regional and national level and others that work at council level?

Mr S Wilson: Yes, there are. Indeed, I have met some that operate on a regional basis, and they have genuine concerns over how regional bodies would be serviced if money were to go to local councils. There is an easy answer to that: if the service were to transfer to councils, the Department could still keep a section of the Youth Service budget that would be distributed to regionally-based bodies. That part of the budget would not go to councils; it would be kept for central administration to fund regionally based bodies.

Given that much of what goes on in youth services takes place at local level, there would be direct accessibility to the decision-makers at local council level. If I am wrong I will take an intervention from the Minister, but it is my understanding that during the time of the budget cuts, and despite the fact that parts of the Youth Service sought meetings with the Minister, they could not get a meeting with her. I cannot conceive that youth organisations would not have access to local councillors and the local council to make their case in such a situation.

That is one reason why I believe that accessibility is important.

4.00 pm

Secondly, the local dimension is important. Local youth services are just that. Youth services are dynamic. They respond to circumstances and to issues in local areas, and they do so very well because they have flexibility. Therefore, the closer those services are to local areas, the better. Likewise, the more funding that is devolved to those local areas, the better. Therefore, when an issue is identified, the services would immediately have a body to approach for funding for a particular role.

There has been great concern — this point has been made to me — that if money is given to local councils, they would simply absorb it into their leisure-services budget or community-services budget. Of course, that does not have to be the case because the money could be ring-fenced. Indeed, I would like a Minister to tell councils that the money will be ring-fenced and that they will be given it only if they match the funding. Therefore, local groups would have access to an increased pot of money through the local council.

The proposal seems to be to move everything into the centre in the longer run and put it into a grand regional education and skills authority that will be remote, inaccessible and unaware of local concerns. However, rather than do that, responsibility for youth services could be devolved to local councils. That would provide better protection for local youth services and, at the same time, ensure that the Department maintains the central money so that regional organisations can be protected. The House should accept the motion for two reasons: first, because of the current short-term funding issue, and, secondly, because of the long-term organisational issue that will likely arise under ESA.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom an leasú ar an rún a mholadh.

I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after the first “the” and insert

“reduction of the Youth Services budget for the year 2008/09; regrets the absence from the budget of a cross-cutting fund for children and young people which could be topped up with in-year monitoring reallocations to support youth services and other projects; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Minister of Education, and the Executive to give appropriate priority to the Youth Services budget in in-year monitoring rounds.”

A LeasCheann Comhairle, tá seanrá sa Ghaedhilg a ndéanann daoine tagairt dó go minic: mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí. Is minic an rá sin i mbéal na ndaoine, agus ní hionadh ar bith sin, nó caithfimid an mhuintir óg a chothú ar gach bealach ar féidir linn. Ní amháin iad a spreagadh agus a ghríosú le gach leas a bhaint as na buanna atá acu go pearsanta, ach, lena chois sin, páirt ghníomhach a ghlacadh ina bpobal féin agus sa tsochaí ar gach leibhéal.

There is an old saying in the Irish language: praise youth and it will flourish. It is oft-quoted, and that is not surprising. We must encourage our young people in every way that we can. We must inspire them and encourage them to use all their talents for their own personal good and to take an active part in their local communities, and society at every level.

“Ní bheathaíonn na briathra na bráithre”, a deir an t-amhrán, agus is fíor é. Bíonn níos mó ná briathra de dhíth ar an óige fosta: bíonn na hacmhainní cuí de dhíth orthu leis an ábaltacht fhisiciúil, intinne, mhórála, spioradálta atá iontu a chothú agus a fhás.

The old song says that the brethren are not fed by words alone. Our young people need more than words. They need the suitable resources to enable them to develop physically, mentally, morally and spiritually. Our Youth Service enables them to do that and it should be properly funded.

The amendment focuses on the budgetary uncertainties that the Youth Service faces, and that is a

real concern in our local communities. The motion states that:

“Youth Services would have greater long term security with local councils, after the Review of Public Administration.”

The motion covers two separate issues, and it should be brought before the House as two separate motions. That is why I have proposed the amendment, which focuses chiefly on the budgetary position of the Youth Service, which is currently its most pressing need.

Given its small amount of resources, the Youth Service in Northern Ireland provides excellent value for money. Members do not have to simply take my word on that; they can ask the young people who benefit from it in the ways that I mentioned earlier.

Although we are led to believe that funding for the Youth Service has been restored for the next three years, there will, in fact, be no increase in its budget. It will remain at the same level as in 2007-08, with no inflationary rise over the next three years. Although that is a significant improvement on the 7% decrease that was in the draft Budget, the situation is still difficult for youth organisations for a number of reasons, such as decreases in peace funding and, due to the Olympics, lottery funding, and increasing demands from young people for services.

The Youth Service provides good value for money. Every £1 invested can attract up to £10 from other investors. As Sammy Wilson said, 20,000 staff work free of charge on a regular basis. That creates a saving of £50 million every year in labour costs, which is double the total annual investment. Furthermore, over 180,000 young people benefit from access to its services each year.

The 2004-06 report by the chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate stated that:

“The youth service makes an important contribution to the personal and social development of many young people ... youth work makes a distinctive and valuable contribution to helping young people overcome barriers to learning and achievement”.

And yet we have to come to this House to fight hard for an adequate budget for the Youth Service.

My calculations show that the proposed increase from 2007-08 to 2008-09 is 2.2% — which is in accord with the figure that Sammy Wilson mentioned — for the Youth Service and the Youth Council. That will represent a slight reduction after inflation, assuming that inflation is approximately 2.5%.

That will not have a significantly adverse effect on the Youth Service operation in 2008-09. However, the percentage increases for the following two years are 1.2% and 0.4% respectively. Therefore, the total Youth Service budget will suffer a real reduction, allowing for inflation, in 2009-10 and 2010-11. If inflation continues at 2.5%, the Youth Service budget will

decrease by 1.3% in 2009-10 and 2.1% in 2010-11. The current level of funding for the Youth Service is equivalent to £1 a week per young person in the Youth Service age range, which is from 4 to 25.

As someone who formerly worked with young people, I know that the Youth Service represents excellent value for money, which is coupled with the annual input of 22,000 volunteers.

The Youth Council is under pressure to extend its funding to regional voluntary youth organisations in order to meet increasing demand for public grants. As I said earlier, that is due, in large part, to reduced funding from other sources.

In addition, more sophisticated services are required to meet the needs of our young people, especially those from disadvantaged areas or groups. With that in mind, I am astounded by the absence from the Budget of a cross-cutting fund for children and young people. The SDLP welcomed the cross-cutting themes in the public service agreements of the Programme for Government. However, we were disappointed that those themes were not backed up or reflected in the Budget that was presented the next day.

The children's fund, a cross-cutting fund aimed at helping vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people, has been abandoned.

My party is on record as highlighting the issue in the Chamber. Indeed, that is one of the reasons that SDLP Members cited when they voted against the Budget.

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

A cross-cutting fund for children, which can be topped up with in-year monitoring reallocations to support youth services and other projects, is needed. That is why the amendment calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Minister of Education and the Executive to work together to give appropriate priority during in-year monitoring to the Youth Service budget.

Mr S Wilson: I appreciate the Member's giving way. Although I understand the point that he has made for trying to find as much money as possible for youth services, does he accept that by the time that money is reallocated as a result of in-year monitoring, it is halfway through the year; it is a one-off payment; and organisations cannot plan how they will spend the money in advance? At present, youth services complain that they must survive on short-term finance, and apply for a grant here and a grant there. Funding becomes available, but then it stops. Plans cannot be made for the future. The Member's proposal will, therefore, not be of any long-term help to the development of youth services in Northern Ireland.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention. The present deficit in youth services funding can be made good through in-year monitoring.

Of course, if there were other means by which that can be done more speedily, I would certainly support the Member in proposing those particular methods.

As I mentioned earlier, what is required is a cross-cutting fund for children that can be topped up through in-year monitoring. That is why I have proposed the amendment, which calls for the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Minister of Education and the Executive to give appropriate priority to youth services during in-year monitoring. I ask Members to concentrate on what is the most pressing need for youth services at present — budgetary need.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity that the motion has presented to debate the provision of youth services. For too long, youth workers have not had the same profile or attention paid to them as education-sector workers. Youth services play an important role in the delivery of a full education service to all young people. The Assembly recognises the important role — often a hidden and unpublicised role — that youth services play in the community. The Education Committee has discussed youth services in the community and the work that is done by the voluntary sector in particular.

The first part of the two-part motion is outdated. The proposers of the motion, Sammy Wilson and Michelle McIlveen, will be aware of that because concerns were raised in the Education Committee that, under the draft Budget, cuts had been made in funding for youth services. Having listened to the Committee's concerns, Caitríona Ruane later confirmed that in the final Budget, £4.6 million would be allocated to youth services for the next three years. Everyone in the Chamber is well aware of the great work that is done by many in the community and, therefore, they welcome the Minister's confirmation of the allocation of that money.

In these modern times, it is not easy for young people as they mature through their teenage years. They are under much more pressure than many of us experienced when we were teenagers. Therefore, it must be made a priority that the maximum possible amount of financial resources and number of personnel are directed towards youth services in order to ensure that young adults are given the best possible assistance.

It is worth repeating that one of the Education Department's key objectives is to facilitate the personal and social development of children and young people and to assist them to gain knowledge, skills and experience to reach their full potential as valued citizens. It goes without saying that if investment is made in young people's education and development as citizens of their communities, they will make a valuable contribution to society.

The programme provided by the Youth Service is admirable: it casts a wide educational net and tries to provide the widest possible spectrum of activities for those participating in youth services.

As some members have mentioned, there are 165 youth clubs and 14 residential centres under the control of the education and library boards, which employ around 960 paid workers and 543 voluntary workers. In the voluntary sector, there are nearly 20,000 workers. That is an impressive record.

4.15 pm

What has been missing from the debate is the view of those who work in the voluntary and statutory sectors. Representatives of those sectors submitted evidence to the Committee and said that they wanted youth services to remain under the Department's control. They said that youth work should remain in the Department's control to allow for joined-up approaches to citizenship, employability, preparation for working life, personal and social education, and vocational development. We must listen to those who deliver youth services on this issue.

We will not decide, in a debate of one hour and 30 minutes, whether to transfer the entire youth budget to local government. I am a local district councillor and know that local district councils make cuts to budgets. There is no guarantee that, if local district councils controlled youth services, there would not be cuts. We must have a wider debate on whether youth services remain under the Department's control. The review of public administration (RPA) did state that there was a role for local district councils; however, it also proposed that the education and skills authority and the Department should be in control of youth services. We do not know what capacity, roles, responsibilities or powers the new councils will have. I caution against having any debate on whether youth services should go —

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

Mr K Robinson: The key issue is the Youth Service budget. In the Minister's hands, the Youth Service is as safe as our education service and our schools. Therefore, I understand the frustration felt by the proposers of the motion, who clearly believe that the only way to save the Youth Service is to remove it from the Education Minister's grip.

The Youth Service plays a vital role in the daily war to save our youth from the perils that await them in a deteriorating society. On many occasions, I have spoken out against the knife culture that stalks our streets, and, after speaking out on that peril for four years, I can claim some small success in persuading the direct rule Administration to introduce tougher knife laws. Knife culture was claiming many young lives and devastating many of our homes. Since then, I have broadened my

focus to opposing the growing gang culture, because it is the gang mentality that wields the knife.

The Youth Service is a bastion of normality and reaches out to our young people in the midst of a sea of bad influences that threaten to engulf them and waste their young lives. It supports and encourages young people to mature and reach their potential as valued individuals and responsible citizens. The policy aim of the Youth Service is:

“to ensure the provision of opportunities for children, young people and young adults to gain for themselves knowledge, skills and experience to reach their full potential as valued individuals; to encourage the development of mutual understanding and promote recognition of and respect for cultural diversity.”

Is that not the essence of what we are trying to achieve?

The Youth Service is composed of both the statutory and voluntary sectors. The statutory sector is under control of the education and library boards and has 165 youth clubs, 14 residential centres, employs almost 1,000 paid workers and benefits from the input of some 540 volunteers. The voluntary sector, which is much larger, is made up of a variety of organisations: some uniformed and some non-uniformed; some church-related and some secular; the headquarters and the umbrella organisations. There are over 2,000 voluntary groups with over 1,000 paid workers and almost 20,000 volunteers who are registered with the education and library boards for the receipt of grant aid. The Youth Service, therefore, is a major bulwark in society.

The reaction to the announcement in the draft Budget of an £8 million cut in the Youth Service's budget merits examination. A Sinn Féin spokesman said that those from disadvantaged backgrounds would suffer most from the lack of mainstream funding. Sinn Féin had serious concerns about the proposed cuts to the Youth Service's allocation in the draft Budget. However, when the final Budget confirmed a cut of £3.4 million to that sector, a Sinn Féin Minister accepted it. A cut is a cut is a cut, and Sinn Féin's actions in Government do not equate with what it champions outside Government. The funding gap remains and, as is heard in the London Underground, “mind the gap”.

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, our former colleague Patricia Lewsley, outlined her views on the situation:

“Those services have been underfunded for too long, and I hope that this budget will start to redress the balance.”

Perhaps we have made a start, but we are far from finished.

However, there are alternative models for the delivery of youth services. For instance, in England, the structures for youth services have usually been part of local government. The Office for Standards in

Education (OFSTED) carries out inspections to monitor the quality and provision of youth services. Recently, a minority of local authorities failed to ensure the proper integration of youth services. However, that is an indictment of the English system rather than of council-run provision *per se*.

Therefore, although there are issues to consider, it is essential that the Youth Service be fully integrated into any plans that the proposed new councils may introduce to improve the lives of citizens. The Youth Service should be viewed as an arm of community welfare and support. As all other arms of community support lie within local government, the same should apply to the Youth Service. In advocating a new role for local government in the provision of youth services, I accept that the policy, training, standards and moderation of the service should be a regional function of the Department of Education or any such body that may be assigned that role.

The Ulster Unionist Party supports the transfer of the Youth Service, and, indeed, community relations, to local government. Under community planning, the councils should be tasked to develop programmes for community development, youth provision and community relations. Councils should co-ordinate the required programmes and projects and be responsible for ensuring their delivery. For councils to be the engines of change in the community, it is essential that the community planning function is enhanced as much as possible. Young people have a critical role to play in community development, and the disengagement of the Youth Service from the Department of Education might boost its status.

The service providers, the Youth Council for Northern Ireland, felt that several prerequisites would have to be met before councils should be put in charge of the Youth Service.

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

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party welcomes the debate and congratulates Sammy Wilson for tabling the motion. We support the motion, because — [*Interruption.*]

I will come to that. We support the motion, because the provision of youth services is imperative. Of all the budgets that require reappraisal, this one deserves protection more than most.

Having said that, and having praised Sammy Wilson for raising the matter, I cannot resist taking the opportunity to highlight the inconsistency in the attitudes of the main parties in Government — again. Mr Wilson criticises a budgetary decision that his party and the Executive, led by his party, endorsed.

The Youth Service does a vital job by providing extra-curricular activities for children and young people. Many of those activities form a fundamental

part of their overall education and help them to mature and realise their full potential as individuals and citizens. Therefore, it should be a funding priority for the Minister.

In the Programme for Government, the Executive pledged to increase the level of participation in youth services to 42%. No one opposed the pledge, and although it may not be sufficiently ambitious, it requires financial support, not a cut in its funding allocation.

The second part of the motion relates to the long-term security of the Youth Service should it be transferred to local councils. Subject to a sensible outcome from the review of public administration, the Alliance Party and its NILGA (Northern Ireland Local Government Association) representatives favour the transfer of the provision of youth services to the control of the enlarged local councils.

Much of what the Youth Service does is educational, but that does not mean that all its functions should be transferred. Rather, the local authorities should accord it a lead role in community planning and in allocating and prioritising resources for general youth services. Local representatives, by virtue of their closeness to communities, should, in most cases, provide the most efficient means of service delivery.

The Alliance Party cannot support the SDLP amendment, because it removes the reference to local council involvement. However, at least it mentions the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and I will talk about his role in a moment. The Alliance Party also believes that that funding is best left in the area of mainstream departmental funding.

I query whether the motion should refer to the Minister of Education, rather than the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who holds the purse strings. The education budget is tight, and there are many demands on it from all sides of the House. I notice that Sammy Wilson seemed to suggest that a cut in the budget for integrated education and Irish-medium schools could provide the necessary resources. However, those are both the subject of Government commitments, where there is parental demand. It is obvious that children will still need to be educated. Where is the saving?

I was glad that Mr Wilson mentioned the fact that a traffic jam caused this debate to be postponed a few weeks ago. I will certainly take his word for that, as he is an honourable man. It removes any doubt, or the feeling that might have been abroad in the House, that that was a contrived situation at a delicate time.

Mr S Wilson: That hurts.

Mr Lunn: I am giving the Member the benefit of the doubt. I accept his explanation absolutely. At least

we are having the debate now — after the Budget and the Programme for Government have been agreed to.

Mr S Wilson: I assure the Member that no one was more angry about the situation than myself. Conor Murphy contrived a traffic jam on the M2 to stop me, and the Speaker did not allow the debate to be delayed.

The Member may have misunderstood me in respect of integrated education. I said that many people felt that giving the priority to opening schools with as few as 12 pupils in them was a waste of resources; not that money directed towards integrated education or Irish education, *per se*, was a waste of resources.

Mr Lunn: I am sure that the Member means what he says, but it sounds — as it frequently does — as though he does not favour integrated education or Irish-medium education in any form whatsoever, and would like to see the end of it. I took that to mean that he saw that as a way of raising some money, which could be put to a very good cause. However, I am not arguing about that. We are debating the Youth Service today, and it is an important subject.

The Alliance Party will support the motion. Regrettably, for the reasons given, it cannot support the SDLP's amendment.

Miss McIlveen: Last week, the Minister of Education's new minder, John O'Dowd, leapt to her defence. He said:

"The duty of an opposition — whether upper or lower case — is to present alternatives." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 28, p20, col 1*].

When he said that, I immediately thought of a boat stranded on the rocks — like the Minister's policies. She is travelling without charts, a compass or sextant. She does not communicate with her crew, she has run the boat aground, and it is taking on water. Now she is looking for everyone else in the Chamber to help her refloat it. It is time that the admiralty at Sinn Féin took a long, hard look at the captain that it has appointed, and remove her command.

Today, we are debating her policy on the Youth Service, and the DUP is suggesting that the Youth Service should seek alternative transportation. No one should underestimate the positive impact that the Youth Service has had on society in Northern Ireland. Thousands of people in statutory and voluntary agencies are offering young people opportunities for social, intellectual, cultural and physical development.

The Youth Service deals with 180,000 young people, outside the formal education process. A failure to provide those services effectively will result in those young people not availing of what is on offer, feeling disenfranchised, and failing to achieve their potential to contribute meaningfully to society. The Youth Service is not just about our traditional concepts of educating; it can also be about learning through social

interaction, which can ensure that young people feel that they belong to their community. It takes our young people off the streets and gives them focus without the necessity of feeling obliged to be there, as they would under formal processes. Indeed, if there are local disturbances or antisocial behaviour in an area, the first place that the local authorities will go to get a handle on the situation is the Youth Service.

In my area, I have seen evidence of Church-based schemes working in collaboration with the statutory agencies to provide activities such as midnight football and intergenerational schemes, which have proven to be highly successful.

The Minister initially proposed an 8% cut in the Youth Service budget, through the draft Budget. When the Minister is faced with a tight budget, the only area in which she looks to make real savings is the Youth Service. The Minister did not look anywhere else — she homed in on it, as she regards it as a minor part of the education budget. It has since been announced that a further £4.6 million will be allocated to education, and only then did the Minister see fit to allocate funding to youth services over the next three years. Unfortunately, that does not make up for the 8% cut, nor does it deal with the perception of those working in youth services that the area is underfunded and is not allowed to maximise its potential.

4.30 pm

Furthermore, we are still unaware of how those moneys will be allocated or how they have been prioritised within youth services. The House should also recognise that the additional funding was allocated to youth services as a result of the pressure applied by the Education Committee and youth service providers.

Not only is the future of the Youth Service threatened by lack of funding, it is also under threat from the new ESA structure. When Gavin Boyd spoke to the Education Committee, there was hardly any mention of youth services, and certainly no attention has been given to a Northern Ireland-wide service.

Youth services would have greater long-term security if they were administered by local councils. I am not suggesting that that should happen tomorrow, but we must picture the scenario where we have the ESA and 11 or 15 councils — it would be a completely different framework. We must ask ourselves whether youth services would be better served under potentially the largest education body in Europe. Would that reflect the current situation, in which the Youth Service is labelled the Cinderella service of the Department of Education? Cuts will inevitably come out of the Youth Service budget first, rather than its ugly sister, Irish-medium education.

The needs of communities are different throughout Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is necessary to retain

the close contact with youth services that would be lost on the introduction of ESA, and that can be done best through local delivery mechanisms at local government level. Entrusting youth services —

Mrs Long: I am surprised to hear the Member speak about Irish-medium education in the way that she has done. Does she not agree that her own party signed up to a Programme for Government that said that it would promote a flourishing Irish-medium education system?

Miss McIlveen: Thank you for your intervention.

Entrusting youth services to local councils will also ensure a level of local accountability and scrutiny that will be absent from the ESA uber-quango. However, certain safeguards must be in place. The Department of Education must retain responsibility for setting Youth Service policy; the Youth Service liaison forum and the Youth Council must be retained; local strategies consistent with the delivery of youth work strategy must be developed and implemented; standards of entitlements to services must be established; and, most importantly, there must be ring-fenced budgets from the Department of Education.

We are currently facing huge restructuring of how the Government carry out their business in Northern Ireland. Constituents —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. This fairy godmother has rung midnight.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate Miss McIlveen on introducing some humour to her speeches. She is obviously learning from the old master Mr Wilson and if she keeps it up she might actually relax and enjoy a debate now and again.

As my colleague Paul Butler said, the motion is out of date. When researching for this debate I looked at Mr Wilson's contribution to the final Budget debate — it is, as usual, one of Mr Wilson's interesting, colourful, and humorous contributions. However, youth services are not mentioned anywhere in it. In fairness to him, he did say at the start of that debate that he was not speaking as Chairperson of the Education Committee, but, considering that he has now tabled this motion twice, one would have thought he would have raised the issue in the Budget debate, if he were so concerned.

Mr Wilson spent most of his time during the Budget debate attacking the SDLP and the Alliance Party, but his most interesting comments were his last words:

"I support the Budget and oppose the amendment." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 27, p123, col 2*].

He supported the Budget, including the budget for the Department of Education, which included youth services. The reason why he supported it, I hope, is

because the Minister had secured extra funding for youth services, which appeared in the draft Budget. I then looked at the Education Committee's response to the draft Budget, which is a three- or four-page letter directed to the Chairperson of the Finance Committee and signed by Mr Wilson.

I scanned the response to see what Mr Wilson, Mr Bradley and the other Members who advocate more money for youth services had to say. I should point out that it is too late for further allocations, given that the Budget discussions are closed. Why were those concerns not expressed in the Budget debate? I came across half a sentence in the response, which said:

"The Committee would question why the bid for Maintenance of the School Estate might not be met".

I assume that the phrase "might not be met" refers to the Department of Finance and Personnel. It is also reported in that response that:

"the Committee noted with concern that a specific bid to enhance the Youth Service may not be met."

That was the sum total of the Chairperson of the Education Committee's contribution on youth services. I cannot find any other contribution from Mr Wilson, the DUP, the SDLP, or the Alliance Party prior to the vote —

Mr K Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Let me finish this sentence. Prior to the Budget's being agreed, I recall the Minister of Finance and Personnel scolding the Alliance Party for proposing amendments, and I remember the SDLP being politically and publicly ridiculed for proposing amendments. However, none of those amendments concerned youth services.

Mr K Robinson: That was a very long sentence, but I thank the Member for giving way. Will the Member confirm whether Sinn Féin members were present at the Committee meeting to which he refers?

Mr O'Dowd: In the Sinn Féin response to the draft Budget, my colleagues Paul Butler and Michelle O'Neill insisted that youth services be prioritised. That response is available to the public.

Youth services need more funding. The Minister was diligent in her task; she went to the Finance Minister and secured more funding. If the Education Committee had fallen in behind her and supported — instead of scrutinising — her, would yet more funding for youth services been secured? That is quite possible.

The motion states that the Minister should:

"redirect resources from within her budget".

From where should that redirected funding come? Should she take it from special needs providers? Should she take it from the classroom assistants? Should she take it from school transport? Perhaps she should close

a couple of rural schools. Neither the amendment nor any of the other parties' contributions have suggested from where the extra funding should come. We can all agree that youth services are a vital component on the way forward.

It was a mistake to attach to this motion the issue of the transfer of youth services to the councils; that is a separate debate. There is nothing to stop the Education Committee from holding its own inquiry and producing its own report on the findings on the way forward for youth services. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: We have heard some colourful speeches so far. There have been all sorts of metaphors — there have been stormy seas to play with, or we could go down the Cinderella route. I am disappointed to discover that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, are the fairy godmother, because I thought that that was the Minister of Education. I was waiting for her to wave her magic wand.

The debate is strange, in that I both agree and disagree with numerous points that Members from all sides have made. Therefore, one could probably conclude that this is a matter that needs more debate. I am convinced that young people need to be empowered. Members who see me around the Assembly will have noticed that I usually have two or three youths with me, seeing what we do up here. It is important that we engage properly with young people.

As Members know, I have had difficulties with the Minister. I am sorry that she has disappeared, because I was going to say something nice. Perhaps somebody could pass on this message to her: we have an opportunity to use our imagination on this issue to make creative and visionary proposals. We could even make radical proposals that could be forward looking and youth orientated.

I agree that there are constraints on budgets; I have heard that from all sides. However, it is important that we find a way to invest in youth services.

I do not wish to demonise young people. Some of the finest people who I have met are the youth of today. However, there is no doubt that we live in changed times. Our prisons are full: what does that say about how society is going? The elderly are afraid, not necessarily that anything is going to happen but they see groups of young people and are fearful. There is also antisocial behaviour and criminal damage in all sorts of areas; and if we do not invest in our youth then we will end up paying for it in antisocial behaviour and criminal damage. Perhaps there is a budget at which Mr O'Dowd can have a look to see where he might find some money.

If I were to look at the real problem; namely adolescence — Minister, I am pleased to see you back because I was saying some good things but felt that

maybe they fell on stony ground. Adolescence is a difficult time, a time when people move from being family orientated to peer orientated to, eventually, being independent. It is a time when, conversely, young people want their independence and yet they fear being isolated, left out or wrong-footed. That is a situation in which when families, schools and communities fail to offer consistent direction and positive goals, adolescents can drift into undesirable behaviour, perhaps tending to become confused and cynical and generally experience a diffused sense of self. That is why we have to see if we can help people.

Who is to do the helping? The single, most important factor in the upbringing of any young person is family. The second most important factor is school because that is where young people form a lot of friendships — which are, incidentally, just as important as the education that they receive. Young people want to be a part of strong, safe communities that foster trust, individual well-being and self-worth, and which encourage social responsibility. The problem is that there are some young people who do not get any of that from their family or their school. The pressure on people to stay on at school while living in, for example, single-parent families or families in which both parents work — that is quite a challenge. If it were not for the voluntary sector we would be in dire straits.

I have the deepest admiration for people who, day in day out, try to look after young people. However, the truth of the matter is that they feel abandoned and unloved; they feel at the bottom of the list of priorities. When we talk about cuts, the fear is that we will see those cuts in front-line services and not in headquarters staff or in desk-bound social workers. Therefore, there is an issue whenever an attempt is made to resolve this matter: where will we find more money? I am looking at the Minister and saying that this is an opportunity to do some good; we would be keen to work together; this is a matter that needs a more appropriate discussion and I would be keen to work with all those Members present.

Mrs M Bradley: We are all aware how youth services have always struggled down the years to provide services. Had it not been for the volunteers working with youth leaders, then the good work that they do could not have been achieved.

If the Youth Service is to receive cuts, it will be a devastating blow and those who will suffer will be the most vulnerable. The cuts will mean that youth services cannot develop, and we should remember that, over the years, most youth clubs have limped along with one leader. However, such a blow will obliterate some youth clubs and possibly obliterate the others. The youth of Northern Ireland need help and direction. They have potential; however, the implications of the

proposed cuts will deal yet another blow to an already impoverished service.

I am also concerned that there are areas that receive at little as 10 hours of youth service work. I am fearful that they will be the sufferers from any cuts in services. I support the amendment.

Mrs Long: I declare an interest as a member of the steering panel of the East Belfast Area Youth Project, as an adult and unit guider with Girlguiding UK, and as a member of Belfast City Council because I believe that the issue being discussed has an impact on all three areas. I welcome the motion although I am surprised by its source. The Member for East Antrim Sammy Wilson is always, to say the least, energetic in his opposition or his support. Certainly, I often feel exhausted listening to him.

4.45 pm

He was very enthusiastic about the Budget and the Programme for Government; I was quite concerned for his blood pressure at one point. He characterised the Alliance Party as seeming:

“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.”—
[*Official Report, Bound Volume 27, p43, col 2*].

He has clearly had time to read the documents and to study the consequences; perhaps that is what kept him late last time. It is clear that the situation was not perfect and that there were problems.

My problem with the motion is that we are dealing today with the consequences of the Budget. It is fine to talk about those consequences, but they are not solely the responsibility of the Minister of Education: they are also the responsibility of the Minister of Finance and his ministerial colleagues in the Executive. It is unfair that only the Minister of Education is mentioned in the motion.

There is some agreement on the substantial issue: the effect that a lack of secure funding and funding fluctuations have on the Youth Service — and we are all aware that fluctuations, cuts and uncertainties damage staff morale. For example, hundreds of staff in the education and library boards were placed on protective notice during the debate that led to the agreement of the Budget. They also undermine staff development and make it difficult to retain and to attract new people into the service, particularly in the statutory sector. Jobs in that sector are not necessarily highly valued, and funding uncertainties mean that there is also very little job security. All those factors are damaging, but, most important, they undermine the consistency of provision.

Intervention with some of our most marginalised young people, particularly through detached youth

workers, is not a one-off event; it requires relationship building, determination and long-term intervention. The danger that qualified, trained youth workers will leave the service because they fear for their jobs creates huge difficulties in recruiting people of similar calibre, who have to start from scratch with the young people in rebuilding relationships. That is a serious issue. I cannot support the amendment, as I do not believe that either special funds or in-year monitoring rounds is a solution, because neither provides the long-term security that is required for strategic planning.

By contrast, ring-fencing funding has merit as a means of ensuring that that funding is spent on the right things.

Mr D Bradley: The amendment calls for in-year monitoring to be used to close the gap in funding. Does the Member not agree that, under present circumstances, that is the best solution to the funding difficulties faced by the Youth Service?

Mrs Long: I agree that it is perhaps the only short-term solution, but I do not believe that it is a solution to the long-term problem of funding the Youth Service. Several Members said that the Youth Service is regarded as a Cinderella service; however, we must get away from that perception so that we appreciate the service's long-term value. Ring-fencing funds for young people, whether in Departments or transferred to councils, would be a wise move, as it would ensure that such funding was not absorbed into other areas.

I also want to highlight the implications for our Budget way down the line, because it is likely that policing and justice will be devolved at some point. Some of the very young people that the Youth Service will be failing through lack of finance will inevitably end up involved in the youth justice system; that has been shown by a great deal of research. Although we do not have the budget line for that today, we will in future and it will affect what we are doing.

Transferring youth services to local councils can be managed. If it is any consolation to the Minister, the Alliance Party's policy of transferring youth services to local councils predates her taking on her role. It is not taking the Youth Service away from a Minister who cannot control it; it is simply our belief that local services are best provided by local councils. We recognise that a major function of the Youth Service is educational, and we also recognise that that would not necessarily mean a transfer of all its functions; however, we want local authorities to take a lead role in community planning and the prioritising of resources. We hope that that will be a constructive way forward.

Mr Gallagher: I support the amendment and welcome the debate. Although the motion provides an opportunity for discussion, I do not agree with its thrust, which proposes to place our Youth Service

elsewhere. That particular point warrants a more detailed debate.

For the moment, I am in no doubt that the Youth Service should sit close to the education and library boards, because of the strong links that exist between those two services. The Youth Service has been a part of the education and library boards for more than 30 years. That said, it has often been the poor relation in that setting. Funding pressures have meant that front-line services, such as classroom services, have been prioritised ahead of it. Nevertheless, the Youth Service plays a very important role in developing the character of our young people during their difficult transition from youth to adulthood.

The Youth Service has more than 20,000 volunteers, many of whom regularly provide an excellent service to Northern Ireland's 2,000, or more, voluntary groups. As I have said, the link between the education and library boards and the Youth Service is crucial. Various experiences have shown how the Youth Service can bring young people together, whether for sports events, meetings or trips away. It has provided many young people with an opportunity to meet young people from different backgrounds.

Our amendment also highlights the need for a fund for children and young people — a glaring omission from the Budget. Contrary to Naomi Long's claims, a fund for children and young people cannot be described as a short-term measure, because it would make an important contribution to the development of the youth services.

The provision of youth workers is one of the biggest costs in the youth budget across all the education boards, whether in urban or rural settings. In recent years, those youth workers increasingly work in stronger partnerships with local schools. That is evident, for example, in the delivery of personal and social education, which is a particularly important part of the curriculum, and another good reason why we must think more carefully about where the Youth Service is placed. The curriculum also includes the teaching of citizenship, which is another vital dimension of the Youth Service. Citizenship helps young people to understand better their duties, rights and responsibilities as citizens. Through integrating youth work with the formal education system, citizenship also provides an opportunity to maximise our young people's potential.

The additional money that has been put into the system since the motion was tabled is welcome. However, how are we to spend it? How will it be distributed equitably across urban and rural areas? It is important that those funds be distributed under the assessment-of-relative-needs exercise (ARNE). For the reasons that I have stated, the Youth Service is

important. Its work is particularly important and well recognised, not least in those areas of high social deprivation, where facilities are lacking. I support the call for more funding for the Youth Service.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I recognise the vital role that youth services play in ensuring that young people have access to a range of positive activities that contribute to their individual learning and achievement. Therefore, I have ensured that the budget for youth services, after taking account of inflation, has been restored in 2008-09 to a level consistent with that of 2007-08.

There is not a decrease in the budget, as Members have suggested. An extra £1.059 million is allocated in 2008-09; an extra £0.3 million in 2009-10; and an extra £0.1 million in 2010-11. The budget will increase, in real terms, by 2.27% in 2008-09, 1.45% in 2009-10 and 1.93% in 2010-11. Of course, I would love those increases to be greater, and the Department recognises the need to put money into youth services, but it has competing priorities and a budget to consider.

Members have lobbied me on various issues — the primary-school system, preschool provision, youth services, classroom assistants — and I am sure that that lobbying will continue. Although the Department has had budgetary constraints to contend with, it has listened to people and allocated that amount of money. The Department held consultations on the budget in three different parts of the North and listened carefully to people's views. Young people made strong cases, and I applaud that; fair play to them. We went into communities, where we spoke to primary school and pre-school principals and listened to people's views. I made significant changes to the budget that was presented to me, for which I make no apology.

I want to put on record my appreciation for the work undertaken by youth-sector workers on behalf of young people. Members know that Contact Youth Counselling Services won the tender for the counselling service. The Department introduced the counselling service for post-primary schools in September 2007, and Members will now know — I have stated it often enough in the House — that there has been a 95% or 98% uptake, which proves the points that other Members made about adolescents. However, I found resources to extend the counselling service to primary and special schools, and that is recognition of the difficulties that young people face and evidence that early intervention is important.

There is no doubt about the value of youth work, and my commitment to youth services is evidenced by the additional resources made available to the sector and the fact that I have listened and responded to the various groups.

I want to thank my officials in the Department of Education. Assembly Members will know how busy they are, as my Department is one of those that receives the greatest numbers of questions for oral and written answer. Despite that, at my instigation, my officials took time to consult local people in various areas of the North. They returned energised, and strongly advised that I should consider youth services. Officials do not get thanked very often, and it is important that they receive recognition.

As Members know, it was not a case of simply getting more resources; I had to critically evaluate my budget and make tough decisions. I allocated resources to maintain the important outreach and child-protection work that is required in the sector. That money was previously available from the children and young people funding package, and I secured resources to maintain such activity. However, that money will not necessarily be used in the same way, because the money for detached work and outreach work will be targeted specifically at meeting the needs of young people who are marginalised. I want to ensure that those resources are allocated according to need and that we deliver on our equality duties right across the North.

5.00 pm

The statutory and voluntary youth sector will have access to funding that will allow those important initiatives to continue. It will be up to them, as delivery agencies, to assure the Department that the resources are allocated according to a fair and transparent assessment of need across the North. On that basis, I have written to each education and library board to ask them to ensure that allocations will be subject to equality impact assessments. Furthermore, I have asked them to ensure that their statutory duties in relation to Irish-medium education are met.

I was disappointed to hear some of the comments about the Irish-medium sector. I thought that Members had moved away from those debates. Irrespective of whether they learn through English or Irish, children have rights, and I make no apology for ensuring that the Irish-medium sector gets its fair share of resources. I thank Naomi Long and Trevor Lunn for their positive comments in relation to that. Members must stop making Irish language a political football; we have to move away from that and move into new times.

I have instructed my officials that all departmental policies must be subject to the equality impact process, and they have a statutory duty to ensure that that happens.

The Department of Education has allocated approximately £35 million to youth and community relations in 2008-09. The sector is fortunate to have such strong community support through its volunteer base, and that is to be commended.

The Department supports 165 statutory youth clubs, 14 residential centres and more than 2,071 voluntary youth units. There are approximately 517,000 young people in the North of Ireland, aged between four and 25, and we estimate that approximately 38% use the youth service. That is a high figure.

The motion refers to a reduction in the youth services budget for 2008-09, and, as I said previously, I have restored that shortfall, therefore I have dealt with those issues. I have listened to the youth sector and those who lobbied on its behalf, and I have made available additional resources. I have turned a potentially negative situation into a positive outcome for the youth budget, and work to develop allocations across the sector is almost complete.

There are difficult decisions to be made in allocating resources across all education and youth services. There will always be more resources needed than it is possible to provide, and, with my colleagues in the Executive, I will continue to raise the profile of youth services.

In-year monitoring is, primarily, a process to deal with the merging in-year pressures and easements. In that context, I will continue to bid for resources, where necessary, for those services for which I am responsible. Decisions on allocations will be a matter for the Executive in the context of competing priorities, but youth will be an area in which we will ensure that money is invested.

The future of the youth sector in the remit of the Department of Education is important. To date, I have seen no evidence to suggest that youth services would have greater stability with local councils. I have not been presented with any arguments that can demonstrate that the interests of children and young people would be better served in local councils, but I am listening carefully. Naomi Long made some interesting arguments in her contribution, and I will consider taking them on board.

The Department of Education is responsible for children and young people from preschool through to primary and post-primary education. It is also responsible for the youth services that are available to the same young people from the age of four to 24. I do not have a closed mind on that; I will listen to all views. However, responses to the review of public administration papers on youth and education welcomed the fact that youth will remain part of the education system.

In recent weeks, I received correspondence that stressed the need for youth services to remain the responsibility of the Department of Education to ensure joint working at governmental level to improve outcomes for young people. Others share that view.

In 2004, the education and library boards consulted with a range of sectoral partners, including youth organisations, youth workers and young people. The review demonstrated that the service, its educational base and its staff were highly valued by young people. The review also highlighted the core aim of youth work as the personal and social education of children and young people, and stressed that work with young people is only youth work when it is educationally based.

The 2004-2006 report of the chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate stated that:

"The Youth Service makes an important contribution to the personal and social development of many young people... youth work makes a distinctive and valuable contribution to helping young people overcome barriers to learning and achievement".

The Department of Education's youth work strategy recommends that one of the key priorities for the service should be to develop and implement a strategy for the development of youth work practice in the formal education sector. It is essential that the Youth Service forges greater links with the formal education sector. We are already working on that, not least through some area-based inspections completed by the Education and Training Inspectorate.

Youth work should be fun and enjoyable, but it is about educating young people to participate, to respect and value difference, and to test their own values and beliefs. Citizenship is taught in schools, but it is experienced and lived out in the Youth Service. The personal and social education of young people is just as important as academic achievement. I have heard that from organisations such as the Confederation of British Industry, and I know that as a former director of Féile an Phobail — the West Belfast Community Festival. I always read through CVs, looking for some mention of volunteering, because it is very important.

For some young people, youth work is a way of achieving accreditation or training, or it can act as a springboard into employment.

Caithefidh an t-oideachas neamhfhoirmiúil an t-oideachas foirmiúil a chomhlánú ar chaoi straitéiseach phleanáilte. Non-formal education must complement formal education in a strategic and planned way. The Youth Service budget, albeit a small percentage of the overall education budget, is ring-fenced and protected when it is allocated. That ensures that the Youth Service budget cannot be used to bolster budgets elsewhere. The value of that budget can be maximised when the formal and non-formal education sectors work more closely together. An obvious example of working more closely together is to share resources, accommodation and buildings.

The Department wants to better utilise the resources that we have tied up in the formal education sector, which are often closed to local young people after a

certain time of day. Officials are working on area planning models that include the youth sector. I will return to that point later. Another example is the contribution made to formal education outcomes by wrap-around services that are provided in areas, such as after-school activities, sport, health-related activities and other services provided by significant adults, such as youth workers in schools who act as role models for young people.

Of the factors affecting school achievement, families and communities have considerable influence in helping young people to develop self-discipline, teamwork, self-belief and good physical and mental health. If any other decision were taken in relation to youth work, there would be a huge lobby from the MLAs, because the extended schools are working well and they are offering breakfast clubs and after-school activities, and the youth clubs are part of that.

The Youth Service can be a good bridge between schools and the community, and we must work harder at exploiting the full benefits of that. The Youth Service can and does work with schools and communities. It can be linked to after-school activities and to providing access to sport, which contributes to fit futures and, in turn, to tackling obesity issues. Youth work provides important opportunities for civic participation, which is essentially the link with the local communities that schools need if we are to draw in parents more.

Schools are making stronger links with the communities. The Youth Service's working with schools and communities can help to foster young people's active involvement. The Education and Training Inspectorate inspects the Youth Service as well as the formal education sector. The latest chief inspector's report stresses the need for connecting better for learners. That important concept of the needs of learners reflects the emphasis placed by the inspectorate on the ability of the Youth Service to meet the learning needs of many people. The inspectorate has also been developing an area-based planning inspection, which examines provision in local communities. That inspection is developing to examine the quality and adequacy of provision and the coherence of that provision for young people. Would that important element of education inspection and continuous improvement not be lost in any transfer to local government?

Formal education is changing. Citizenship is now part of the curriculum, and employers are telling us that young people who are achieving some of the highest levels of educational attainment are not prepared for the world of work.

The world of work is changing, and the entire emphasis is now centred around building skills, enabling

young people to fulfil their potential and helping them to play an active role in a diverse and rapidly changing society. The North of Ireland is changing.

We have a 30-year legacy of conflict; dark days to which no one wants to return, but which we must never forget.

As a result of the arrival of new members of our society, our communities are changing. Migrant workers bring their families to live here, and these young people are to be found in early-years settings, schools and youth services. We are also building new relations between communities in the North and the South and with England, Scotland and Wales.

Since youth work is curriculum-based and centred on respect for diversity —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, your time is up. I remind Mr Bradley that he has five minutes in which to make his winding-up speech.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cúig bhomaite, mar sin. In today's speeches, there were many areas of agreement about the Youth Service, and that is welcome. Many Members agreed with me about the cuts to the Youth Service's budget and about the fact that it provides excellent value for money — each pound invested is increased tenfold. First-class services are provided to 180,000 young people, and, through voluntary work, the sector self-invests £50 million per annum. Few other sectors can boast of such value for money.

Mr Sammy Wilson said that he was doubtful about whether in-year monitoring would be helpful in making good the deficit in the Youth Service budget. However, as my amendment points out, if the children and young people's fund had not been abandoned, we would have had a ready-made resource from which to draw. In the SDLP's amendment to the Budget motion, it warned against the abandonment of that fund.

The most pressing need faced by the Youth Service is budgetary. The uniformed organisations and others are already aware that their regional funds will be reduced and that that reduction will, in all likelihood, be passed on to local groups.

Members referred to the Youth Service's valuable role in augmenting more formal educational settings by dealing with young people who have become disengaged from education. Without the Youth Service, those young people might cost society much more.

Trevor Lunn said that he could not support the SDLP amendment "for the reasons given". However, other than saying that the Alliance Party's NILGA representatives had expressed a preference for the responsibility for the Youth Service to go to councils, he did not give any reasons. The SDLP amendment does not state where that responsibility should be

located — that is a debate for another day. In the future, I hope to have the opportunity to debate that matter in the House. When the time is right, I will relish the occasion. In the meantime, the SDLP amendment seeks to focus on the reduction in Youth Service resources throughout the Budget period.

John O'Dowd's research facilities seem to be rather restricted. Had he bothered to read my contribution to the Programme for Government debate, he would have seen that I clearly highlighted the reduction in the Youth Service's budget. The SDLP amendment suggests that that money should be found in in-year monitoring. No one has suggested any other source, and, although that may not be the ideal solution, it is certainly a practical way to close the funding gap faced by the Youth Service. Indeed, the Minister said that she would seek to identify further Youth Service funding through that method.

Naomi Long agreed with me when I intervened in her speech, and I agree with her that long-term funding must be secured. However, in the interim, in-year monitoring is probably the best solution to the problem.

5.15 pm

The Minister agreed with all the Members who spoke about the role of Youth Service, but she was at odds with the figures that were available to others. As I understand it, there is a decrease of 1.3% in 2009-10 and 2.1% in 2010-11. Perhaps the Minister is unaware of the effects of inflation. As I said earlier, the Minister said that she would seek to find extra funding through in-year monitoring, and I welcome that.

Nothing that I have heard so far convinces me to change my mind. I retain my view that the SDLP amendment represents the best practical solution to the difficulties faced by the Youth Service, and I urge other Members to support it. Go raibh céad maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr S Wilson: I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. The issue is important and I am pleased to have a second bite at the cherry, despite the cynicism of Mr Lunn, who, for some reason, thought I was running away from the debate.

The first argument advanced by some of the Members who oppose the motion is that it is out of date because changes made following the issue of the draft Budget have been included in the final Budget. Some Members may have difficulty with numeracy; and perhaps Mr O'Dowd might need to enrol in one of the account for success courses, which the Minister runs in schools.

However, the fact remains that the inflation rate this year is either 2.5% — in the Government's view — or 4%, as appears from the retail price index. As the increase in the budget for the Youth Services is 2.2%,

then using anyone's mathematics, that amounts to a real cut. That real cut gets worse in the following year, because, assuming that there will be a constant rate of inflation, the increase will fall to 1.2%. That real cut gets even greater in the third year. The motion is not out of date: it is still relevant. There will be a real cut, and it will impact on the Youth Service budget.

The second argument put forward was that I should not complain because I supported the Budget — Mr Lunn and Naomi Long made that point: so too did all the Sinn Féin Members. I did support the Budget, but was allocating £9.4 billion. Only the most naive of Members would believe that, given a Budget of such size, there would not be one Member who would not have some concern about some line or aspect in that Budget. When one supports £9.4 billion of expenditure, it means that one is supporting general allocations; it does not mean that one is supporting every part of the Budget. If that were the case, I would be unable to open my mouth on any subject for the rest of the year.

Mrs Long: Some may welcome the situation in which the Member would be unable to open his mouth on any subject for the rest of the year. However, that aside; did he not make the point about me finding fault where there was "no fault". When one makes statements such as that, one can expect to be called to account later on. The Member made the outrageous statement in the first place.

Mr S Wilson: Of course, and I accept —

Mr McElduff: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: Let me deal with this intervention, for goodness sake, before I move on.

Mr S Wilson: When we debated the Budget, which the Alliance Party opposed, it rubbished the whole thing. It said that there was no merit in a Budget that was going totally in the wrong direction. At that stage I said, and I still contend, that one cannot find fault with the broad thrust of the Budget or its broad allocations. The Alliance Party was seeking to manufacture faults.

Mr McElduff: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: I am sorry, I do not get extra time for taking interventions otherwise I would love to give way.

Mr O'Dowd said that there was so little concern from the Committee for Education that it never raised any objections to the Youth Service budget. If Mr O'Dowd's numeracy is bad, his literacy is also bad. If he had read the report, which was provided to Members by the Library in the information pack, he would know that the Committee referred to the Youth Service budget in two paragraphs. Departmental officials also attended a Committee meeting to give a presentation on the budget and to answer questions. I am sure that other members of the Committee can

confirm that the Youth Service was raised during that meeting. Mr O'Dowd is totally incorrect to say that no concern was raised by the Committee or by me on behalf of the Committee. Perhaps, after he has learned to count, he will also learn to read, and that will help him.

Mr Kennedy: It worked for you.

Mr S Wilson: Yes, it worked for me. *[Laughter.]*

Dominic Bradley said that in-year monitoring could solve the problem. It is clear from my conversations with people from the Youth Service that they do not want short-term solutions. They do not want a sticking plaster with a bit of money thrown at them. They want long-term strategic planning, but in-year monitoring does not allow that. The money often does not become available until halfway or three quarters through the year, and it may be of no use at that point. Mr Bradley also said that the issue of where youth services should be located is a debate for another day. The short-term financial problem and the long-term problem of how the budget can be secured with local input are inextricably linked. The only way to do that is for the Youth Service to be put into local councils.

I will comment on some of the Minister's points. It is surprising that few Sinn Féin Members defended her position on where the long-term provision of the Youth Service should be. Perhaps they did not have enough time to get round to the figures in the five minutes of speaking time that were available. The only Sinn Féin Member to talk about the long term was Paul Butler. He said that provision for the Youth Service should not go to councils because they would also cut budgets; that was the only defence. I made the point that, when the Minister cut the budget, she would not even talk to anyone from the youth services. It is inconceivable that, if a council cut a budget in a local area, those who were affected would not have some access to those who made the decision. That is where the safeguard would lie. I accept that councils have to consider budgets, but at least there is accessibility to the councils and the decision-makers.

The Minister also said that the education and library boards, the Education and Training Inspectorate and the Department of Education youth work strategy all gave evidence in support of youth services staying with the Department. I would have been amazed if they had not supported that. Those bodies all have a vested interest; the Youth Service is part of the bureaucracy. Around 65% of every pound that is available to the Youth Service is absorbed by the bureaucratic structures inside the Department of Education and the education and library boards. Of course they will not want to give that up — that is the whole point. Moving away from a body that is essentially bureaucratic and which absorbs all that money, would, I hope, result in more money percolating down to the people who work

on the ground, the volunteers who give their time and the services that are available locally.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: I did not give way to the Member for West Tyrone Mr McElduff, so if were to do so now I would be accused of being sectarian and biased. I would love to give way, but I have only a moment or two left.

In its submission to the review of public administration, the Youth Council for Northern Ireland, which does not have a vested interest, did not rule out services going to local councils. They merely asked for the kinds of safeguards to which Naomi Long, Basil McCrea and I referred.

The Youth Council for Northern Ireland simply said that if those services are to go to local councils, certain measures should be taken. Therefore, there is no conclusive evidence that those who are involved in the Youth Service wanted to stay with the Department of Education — there is only the evidence presented by the bureaucrats and those who have a vested interest in maintaining the current educational structures.

In conclusion, I am gravely concerned by what I have seen of ESA and its treatment of the Youth Service. I am worried that, in the long term, that Cinderella service will become even more so. Therefore, I ask the Assembly to support my motion and oppose the amendment so that, in the short term, the funding of the Youth Service can be safeguarded, and, in the long term, its future can be safeguarded by placing it with local councils.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Mr Wilson. We do not want Mrs Long to be too exhausted from listening to you.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the eight per cent reduction of the Youth Services budget for the year 2008-09; calls on the Minister of Education to redirect resources from within her budget to make good the cuts; and believes that Youth Services would have greater long term security with local councils, after the Review of Public Administration.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Plans for an Educational Campus at the Lisanelly Site, Omagh

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the debate will have 15 minutes to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately six minutes.

5.30 pm

Mr McElduff: Thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle. For clarification, do I have six minutes or more than six minutes?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has 15 minutes.

Mr McElduff: Thanks very much, David, you are a very generous man. I am pleased that a lot of Members are leaving the Chamber.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should take his seat until order has been resumed.

Mr McElduff: Thank you for assisting in bringing order to the House. I am pleased to have the opportunity to discuss plans for an education campus at, or on, the Lisanelly site in Omagh. My purpose in proposing this topic was to serve as a helping hand to the project, the educationalists and others based in Omagh who are progressing the project. It is appropriate to have this debate on the day that the Minister of Education made a significant statement on the development of area-based planning for post-primary education. It is coincidental and positive that that connection is made today.

The Minister will know that this proposal is a reflection of area-based planning, and has been undertaken by educationalists working in close collaboration with each other. The proposal is pioneering and visionary, and is perhaps digging channels in which others might follow.

I applaud the efforts of the educationalists who have committed to the project — not least school principals in the area; Monsignor Donnelly, Rev Robert Herron, and the chief executive of the Western Education and Library Board, Mr Barry Mulholland. I applaud others who have been involved, including local government officials, people from the business community, local political parties and, particularly, the MP for West Tyrone, Pat Doherty, for taking the lead on this matter. I am grateful, too, for the active support of other MLAs, including Tom Buchanan.

George Bain would be proud of the proposal. The terms of reference for Mr Bain and his review team were:

“To examine funding of the education system, in particular the strategic planning and organisation of the schools’ estate, taking account of the curriculum changes, including the wider provision for 14-19 year olds, and also demographic trends.”

The Bain Report championed an area-based approach to planning the schools’ estate, which is exactly what the proposal will do. I was pleased that, in the Chamber yesterday, the First Minister indicated the serious intent of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to assist the project in whatever way it can. Earlier today, the Minister of Education cited the proposal as a model of best practice. Members will, today, have received lobbying information on this issue in their pigeonholes.

Schools in the Omagh area are preparing themselves for current and future challenges and are adopting a long-term strategic plan to provide the best educational provision for pupils in the future.

The Lisanelly site, which was vacated by the British Army, provides Omagh and the wider north-west region with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make plans for schools for the future.

The site covers 47.7 hectares or 117.8 acres of mixed-use land. The size and nature of the site lends itself well to an education campus because it has natural, identifiable areas, which would ensure that schools have their own zones while benefiting from a campus-style development and shared services.

Page 8 of the document ‘Omagh Educational Campus Concept Outline’ details a full-service facility that includes an arts and media centre to complement Omagh’s new Strule Arts Centre; leisure, sports and swimming-pool facilities; hydrotherapy pool; youth centre; library and Internet cafe facilities; specialist teaching and learning facilities — the list goes on as to the full-service facility that the Lisanelly site campus can become.

The schools that have been involved in working up the project include Arvalee School and Resource Centre, which requires a new school building; Sacred Heart College and Omagh High School, which both require new school buildings; and Omagh Christian Brothers Grammar School and Omagh Academy, which both operate on limited sites with playing fields that are located off site. Their buildings have been extended and refurbished during the past 15 years. However, capital investment will be required in the future because the buildings are far from the required standard.

Individual proposals that have been submitted to the Department by the aforementioned schools have highlighted the lack of greenfield sites in Omagh. The Lisanelly site has acted as a catalyst that will bring all

the sectors together in one campus. The trick is that they will each retain their own individual ethos while they share services.

I commend the Department of Education's input in the project. It has helped to co-ordinate local discussion and to widen the project's appeal. The Department of Education must further take note — as, indeed, must the Department of Finance and Personnel and the wider Executive — that the proposal also majors on the modernisation agenda, and the effective and efficient delivery of services. It will provide efficiency savings from the provision of shared facilities, such as playing fields, computer and library suites; the potential to share staff, including cleaning, catering and administrative support staff; the sharing of facilities and resources among young people; and the opportunity to develop a sustainable and safe transport network for routes to schools — a cycle path and walkway, for example. It will also serve as a catalyst for further urban regeneration of Omagh and the west of the Bann region. Ultimately, key primary sites in the town of Omagh will thereby be freed up that will enable other economic and social projects.

The project has the wider community's support. Therefore, it is well worth study by the Executive in order to determine whether they should enable it to happen. It has generated considerable enthusiasm, even excitement, in the area. The proximity of the site to the Omagh campus of the South West College will optimise the use of educational accommodation and resources and will ensure that all pupils' educational needs will be met.

Local business leaders, including the Omagh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, are supportive of the project. The chamber considers the project to be a major initiative that will deliver the education and skills that are required to underpin the socio-economic regeneration of Omagh, the entire west of the Bann region and the north-west.

Page 6 and 7 of the concept outline lists the project's education benefits. Ultimately, when one speaks of children's education to the Minister, educational benefits will come first in any discussion.

Anyone who walks up Market Street, High Street, John Street or Scarffes Entry in Omagh at about 3.30 pm on a weekday will see thousands of post-primary pupils. I often wonder if there will be enough jobs to meet the requirements of those pupils. I marvel at the huge number of young people in Omagh and how neatly the project fits the town.

The campus will adopt a new approach to the provision of education in the Omagh area; provide accommodation for special and post-primary education; enhance collaboration; improve the quality of opportunities and experiences for pupils through the

curriculum, learning, teaching, personal growth and social development; broaden the subject choice; enrich provision and capitalise on the expertise that already exist in schools; and harmonise education policies. We often hear that there is much change happening in education in areas such as the curriculum, extended schools, special-needs provision, youth provision, transport and the broader educational provision in the local community. All those education policies can be brought together and harmonised on the campus site.

There are more educational positives and benefits to the project, which other Members can elaborate on. Without hesitation, I commend the project to the Assembly and to the Minister of Education, who is actively involved, both personally and through her officials. I hope that the vision of educationalists in Omagh will be rewarded through the delivery of a major project of this kind.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member for his gratitude towards me for allowing him to speak for 15 minutes. That decision was not mine.

Mr Buchanan: The importance of the transfer of the Lisanelly and St Lucia sites to the Northern Ireland Executive cannot be overemphasised. We recognise the enormous potential of the sites for the social and economic development not only of Omagh town and district but of the wider western region.

It is important to remember and to reflect on the history of the two sites. St Lucia barracks has a long and distinguished history dating back to the 1880s. Some of Omagh's finest listed buildings are on the St Lucia site; therefore any development should respect that. Similarly, the Lisanelly Army base provided a base for the soldiers who protected the community of West Tyrone for many years. It is vital to remember that many local people lost their jobs when the Lisanelly and St Lucia sites closed. We must also pay tribute to those members of the Army, and particularly the UDR and RIR members, who served from those bases — the community in West Tyrone is very proud of what those people achieved and is thankful for the safety and security that they provided.

However, we recognise the need to develop the schools estate in Omagh. In particular, Omagh High School desperately requires new accommodation and its governors are being told to wait for the development of the school campus on the Lisanelly site.

As the Member who spoke previously stated, Omagh District Council, along with other bodies, has worked hard to engage with schools, and other interested parties, to advance the proposal for an educational campus. The proposal to locate a shared-schools campus on the former military lands at Lisanelly, Omagh is in keeping with the Executive's commitment to the modernisation agenda, which is

about the delivery of better results and a more responsive and high-quality service that matches the requirements of the public — especially in West Tyrone. However, questions remain over the enthusiasm of all the participants in the process.

5.45 pm

Much of the focus will be on the Ministry of Defence, which seems intent on selling the site on the open market. However, the Department of Education's commitment to the project is also open to question. If the Minister is determined to progress the concept of an educational campus, she must present a strong vision for the site. Will the Minister detail any bids that she has made for the concept, her level of commitment to it, and where it sits on her priority list? If the project is to progress, and as Members debate the matter, it is important to have those answers.

A huge question remains about whether, if the site were handed over to the Department of Education in the morning, it could advance the site's development. Everyone is looking to the future of the site and, should the development of an educational campus not go ahead, questions will be asked. The first will be a request to the Minister to provide new accommodation for Omagh High School to replace the existing crumbling structure. Anyone from west Tyrone who is familiar with the school knows that it desperately needs a new building, as do other schools in the area that have been mentioned, such as the Arvalee School and Resource Centre. I understand that it is in line for a new building, and perhaps money has been ring-fenced for that and other schools.

It is important that we receive clear information as soon as possible on the future of the site. The idea of an educational campus has much merit, and it would release land adjacent to Omagh town centre for economic development, retail outlets, council offices, inward investment, the development of infrastructure and the strengthening of the town's economic core.

Therefore, it is important to know whether that is achievable, and the many questions that are hanging in the air must be answered, such as whether the site will be made available. I encourage the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to continue to lobby for the transfer of the site to the Executive for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland, and I will support any efforts to achieve that. During yesterday's Question Time, I was encouraged, like the last Member, by the First Minister's response to a question on the Lisanelly site.

It is important to push ahead in an attempt to secure the future use of the site for the people of Northern Ireland. However, there must be some degree of realism and practicality. The Department of Education cannot abdicate its responsibility —

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

Mr Buchanan: The Department of Education cannot abdicate its responsibility to post-primary schools in Omagh: it must ensure that buildings of a high standard are provided, whether this development proceeds or not.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There must be an echo in the Chamber.

Mr B McCrea: I trust that Mr Buchanan's extra minute will not be deducted from my allotted time.

Mr Deputy Speaker: No, it will not.

Mr B McCrea: I was born in Omagh, so I have some connection that lets me stand up and talk about these things.

I am struck by the wider questions to which the debate gives rise. I have spoken to many of the key members of the Western Education and Library Board in Fermanagh about their region-wide plans to bring people together. The general point is that one size does not fit all. Rather, it is about where there is agreement, and where people come together and decide the most appropriate form of education for their children. That is a good thing. I am aware of the informed debate in Omagh. People started off holding particular points of view, but the various options were explained to them. At the end of the day, all parents simply want a good education for their children. Who delivers that and where it is delivered are important, but secondary, considerations.

I am struck by the opportunity that the land at the barracks presents. We could examine whether the Dickson plan, which operates in Craigavon, could be replicated in a larger area. However, problems could arise if we were to start to build new schools on a greenfield site. What could be done, were that the case?

Our educational requirements change over time. We have considered the demographics, but who knows what is in store for the price of oil, transportation costs and advances in information technology. It is conceivable that people would laugh at us if we were to bring everything to one site. In future, everything could be distributed, so small, decentralised educational establishments may be preferable.

However, the issue raises interesting opportunities. I have had representations from all sections of the community in the Omagh area, and they are particularly interested in seeing what can be achieved. It is worth saying that, although the consensus may be to bring services together, existing investments cannot be removed. Members will be aware that the Omagh campus of the South West College — a fine building — has recently been completed. I have visited it, and it is unlikely that anyone would want to move it. Therefore, it will be a matter of developing close links.

The Ulster Unionist Party's key points are that it openly supports local schools coming together in imaginative and visionary ways; that no central template should come from the Department; and that local communities should produce organic and flexible local solutions.

As Mr McElduff said, it is interesting that we are having this debate in the light of the Minister's statement earlier about area planning. If the right people got around a table with a willing attitude, area planning could be sorted out in a weekend. One looks at developments and at who will work together. However, when we get into the detail, all sorts of issues crop up that must be worked through. Therefore, it will be an iterative process.

When proposals are introduced, there is a danger that someone will come up with reasons why they should not be acted on. I am more inclined to say that we should work out what can be done and find out what potential opportunities offer.

The proposals are to be commended. I am aware that the Western Education and Library Board came in for some criticism from parents when other proposals were put forward. People think that whatever is suggested is predestined and the only option. It is important to say that that is not the case and to emphasise that it is an opportunity that we must investigate and try to work out together. Our overriding objective is to educate our children.

Dr McDonnell: Like other Members, I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. Although I do not live in Omagh, was not born in Omagh and cannot claim to have spent a night in Omagh, I have spent many a day there and have received many a warm welcome. I have the highest regard for the people that I met in Omagh, whether they agree or disagree with me politically.

This concept of having an educational campus on the Lisanelly site has been around for a while, and I am warmly enthusiastic about it. The issue will dictate the success and prosperity of Omagh for the next generation, and perhaps the generation after that.

Rather than looking at the educational campus only, I will take a wider view of the project, because I see the campus as the core element of the redevelopment of Lisanelly and St Lucia. Comparing it to Belfast, the development would be similar to combining Laganside and the Titanic Quarter. That would create all sorts of possibilities, such as land being released, and schools being moved. It allows for a new vision and, indeed, the opportunity to redesign the town of Omagh in the context of the twenty-first century.

I feel particular empathy for the people of Omagh, who have suffered a lot over the last 40 years; however, two particular instances stand out — the

horrific bomb attack that happened there almost 10 years ago, in which 31 people were killed; and the loss of the acute hospital, and the psychological damage and depression that that has created. It is time that the town of Omagh and its people were given something back, and the development of Lisanelly barracks is an opportunity to do that. That development presents the perfect opportunity to give that meaningful gift to the people of Omagh.

The Assembly needs to unite behind a development agenda for the site. That agenda needs to encompass more than the educational campus, and although I see the campus as being the core of the development — the anchor tenant, for want of a better term — I believe that the wider opportunity for development is just as important, and that makes great sense. Omagh Chamber of Commerce and Industry has done an excellent job — as has the local district council — of lobbying for and promoting the redevelopment of the site, particularly the concept of creating an educational campus.

I endorse that visionary concept, on behalf of the SDLP. I urge those involved to take whatever steps that they can to make the development happen. I believe that, like Laganside and various other projects, some type of development trust, involving all the stakeholders, needs to be created for that site, in order to provide a vehicle for delivering on all the potential opportunities — not just educational, but economic and social. The project could end up creating an unbelievably successful integrated campus, with a number of schools sharing facilities and resources, and coming together for subjects that could not be delivered elsewhere, or could not normally be delivered in a single school.

I have no doubt that opportunities exist on the margins of the site for several enterprise units that could facilitate local businesses. As I said earlier, the sites of the crumbling schools that are going to have to close would offer the perfect opportunity for even greater development. My friend the Member for West Tyrone Mr Buchanan suggested earlier that the whole town of Omagh could be opened up and changed.

The proposed education village would probably represent the biggest renovation project in Northern Ireland for a long time to come. It affords us the opportunity to show just how innovative we can be in our thinking and planning.

I want to commend Omagh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Western Education and Library Board, and Omagh District Council for the considerable amount of time and effort that they have put into the project. The development could bring tremendous benefits for Omagh, but could also reinstate Omagh as the hub of County Tyrone.

Having spoken to Margaret Ritchie, the Minister for Social Development, I know that she is keen to work with the Minister of Education, and others, to ensure that any social development interests in the development of the site are fully brought to fruition, and she has made it very clear that she wants to get a stake in the ownership of the site in order to kick-start that development.

6.00 pm

There is a great deal of good will on this matter. From my own experience, through the Omagh Chamber of Commerce lobbying me, I have had discussions with the Secretary of State for Defence in London. Those discussions are difficult, and perhaps the issues will be difficult to sort out regarding the site, but there is a large amount of goodwill — not just here in Belfast, but in Dublin and London as well — to get this project off the ground.

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

Dr McDonnell: We need to build on that goodwill, and we need to create the momentum that will be necessary to fulfil the opportunity that Lisanelly presents.

Dr Deeny: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this very exciting project, and I thank the previous Members who have spoken of their support for it. Omagh is my county town — it has been for almost 22 years. Like the proposer of the motion, I live 11 miles from Omagh, but it is my county town. This is a wonderful opportunity: it has just come at a unique time, and we simply must not miss it. The entire education campus embraces the spirit of collaboration, sharing, tolerance, inclusion and promotion of mutual respect — exactly the way it should be, after 30 years of conflict.

As Dr McDonnell said, this is an extremely innovative project. It embraces and meets the aspirations of a shared future. I have always liked Omagh, and the way its people have risen following their devastation — and I do not mean any disrespect to other towns.

The campus is the way forward for Northern Ireland. It is inspirational; and it is how we should educate our children in the future. It will provide a state-of-the-art learning environment for up to 3,500 pupils. As Mr McElduff and Mr Buchanan said; up to six local schools will relocate to the site, with each school maintaining its individuality and ethos. Two schools need new buildings quickly and another two have problems, which Mr McElduff mentioned. The education campus in Omagh would also meet the recommendations of the Bain Report, with regard to sustainability and collaboration.

This wonderful project is being supported by virtually the entire community, school principals, governors,

trustees, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Western Education and Library Board, local business leaders, the Rev Robert Herron and Monsignor Joseph Donnelly. I highly commend this collective vision: it is one of enhancement of collaboration and co-operation between schools.

This is a wonderful and unique opportunity to augment community and social cohesion — it is not just about getting exam results. It is an opportunity for the local community to take the lead in education in the area for the benefit of all of our pupils. Both of the area's special schools, as well as the primary, high and grammar schools will be located on the site. I was interested to hear that Mr McCrea was born in Omagh — I did not know that.

As someone who has been through the education system all the way, I know that education — and the Minister is looking at me — is not just about getting good exam results. Of course, good exam results are important, but many other things are needed too. We need to learn; and hopefully we will learn quickly in Northern Ireland.

Social skills; better human relationships; understanding other views, traditions, cultures, and an overall feeling of happiness in the community all come from good education. This is not just about educational benefits, but I will name a few of them in the time remaining. This project will incorporate inter-sectoral, cross-sectoral and cross-community involvement, and it will improve the quality of individual opportunities and experiences. As Mr McElduff said, it will provide for the establishment of specialist provision on the site. It will broaden pupils' subject choices; harmonise education policies; encourage social integration and appreciation of other traditions; facilitate transport planning for pupils in the area, and facilitate and sustain regeneration of the greater Omagh area.

Of interest to me is that this project is described as a full-service facility. That is a unique and exciting concept. The campus will incorporate facilities for health and social services, adult education, youth provision, sports, arts, recreation and community regeneration and development.

The opportunity also exists for the sustainable development of the flood plain for leisure and sporting purposes. It is also important to repeat that land adjacent to Omagh town centre will be released for economic development, retail and office space, council development, inward investment and infrastructure if existing schools move out to the new campus site, thus strengthening the town's economic core.

As with all great and exciting projects, there is, unsurprisingly, a degree of urgency that relates to finance. People who have lobbied me have said that the money is required by 1 April. Perhaps the Minister

of Education can use her influence in the Executive and ask the Minister for Social Development whether her Department has given a commitment to purchase the Lisanelly site on behalf of the Department of Education. Will she also ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel to request an extension of the 1 April deadline from the Ministry of Defence on the purchase of the former Lisanelly army site?

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

Dr Deeny: Just to finish —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time. Order. Time.

Dr Deeny: This is an opportunity that we must not miss.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This topic was tabled by my constituency and party colleague Barry McElduff, and I thank him for that. I hope that the proposal will secure the same cross-party backing in the Assembly that it has received in Omagh.

This pioneering project would see each school in the campus having its own independent environment and retaining its unique ethos. However, each school would share common state-of-the-art facilities and take part in common activities such as sports and science.

In response to Barry McElduff during yesterday's Question Time, the First Minister, the Rev Ian Paisley, made six key points. He said that he was in correspondence with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and in dialogue with the Secretary of State, Shaun Woodward, on the issue. He cited the joint British-Irish declaration of April 2003, and I will return to that later. He also stressed the impact that the Lisanelly site — and other sites — would have on the investment strategy, and he said that he was pressing the issue with the British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. The First Minister also said that Gordon Brown, when he was Chancellor, had promised to gift the sites.

Subsequently, he made the core point in answer to a supplementary question. He said that there is an absolute need to establish the principle of gifting on this issue. That comment relates to a joint communiqué that was issued by the British and Irish Governments following talks between them in 2003, which intimated that the British Government would transfer additional Ministry of Defence sites to the Executive of a re-established local Administration. That is core to the issue.

In pursuance of that, I have been in correspondence with the Prime Minister, the Treasury and the Ministry of Defence. I have had numerous meetings, but the only negative meeting was with the Ministry of Defence; it was a brutal meeting with Des Browne. He said that he did not care whether he got his money from the Executive, the open market, or the Treasury — but he wanted his money. He would not budge on the issue.

Members must bear that in mind; we have a battle on our hands.

I have met Owen Paterson, the Conservative Party's spokesperson on the North. He has been to Omagh twice and visited the site. He supports the whole concept, as does Alistair Carmichael, the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

The Omagh educational campus group is the core driver of the project. It comprises Rev Robert Herron, who is a Presbyterian minister, Monsignor Joseph Donnelly, the Catholic parish priest in the area, and Barry Mulholland, who is the chief executive of the Western Education and Library Board. They are driving the project, and they have the total support of the chief executive of Omagh District Council and of the Omagh Chamber of Commerce and Industry. We had a useful meeting with Shaun Woodward, the British Secretary of State, who said that he wanted to help make the project a reality. Indeed, he expressed a wish to visit the site. We also met with Patrick Cormack, who is chairperson of the Select Committee on the North, and with officials from the Department of the Taoiseach in Dublin.

More locally, we have had useful meetings with Ministers Peter Robinson, Margaret Ritchie and Martin McGuinness. We have also had numerous meetings with the Minister of Education, Caitríona Ruane. If the proposal proceeds, it will become an anchor project.

Lisanelly is a massive site comprising over 170 acres, 120 of which are available at Lisanelly and 50 of which are available at St Lucia. However, the focus at this point is on the Lisanelly site. The campaign has been pursued actively. The other major negative is the lack of response to a freedom of information request that we submitted to the MOD and the NIO on 7 December 2007 asking what the site cost in the first place. Three months later, they have refused to respond to that request, because we know that it cost very little or, indeed, nothing. Yet, they want to claim millions of pounds from our Executive.

I am stating all the positives and some of the negatives to highlight the extent of the campaign that we have on our hands and to stress the importance of working collectively to pursue the project. It will be a real litmus test of whether the British Government were earnest in their commitment when they signed that joint communiqué, or whether they were merely trying to bluff us. That is the core point.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuil an-áthas orm deis a bheith agam páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht tábhachtach seo. Gabhaim buíochas lenár gcomhghleacaí Barra Mac Giolla Duibh as an ábhar tábhachtach seo a thabhairt faoi bhráid an Tionóil.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to participate in the debate, and I thank our colleague Barry McElduff for securing the Adjournment debate.

This morning we heard from the Minister of Education about her plans for area-based planning. At the bottom of the structural pyramid is the specific area group. Although it is at the bottom of the organisational pyramid, it is the most important aspect, because it is a local group and will therefore ensure that local needs are met.

The Lisanelly schools working group provides the nucleus for a specific area group in the Omagh area. The Omagh educational campus offers an ideal opportunity for schools in that area to meet all the challenges that face the education sector, such as the provision of the entitlement framework on a common basis to sharing buildings, facilities and staff, while at the same time allowing each of the schools that are involved to maintain their individuality and ethos on a single campus. That will be coupled with a holistic approach to teaching and learning through collaboration, co-operation and interdependency. The campus meets the aspirations of a shared future through the co-operation of the controlled, maintained and voluntary sectors.

There is a strong, local buy-in to the shared campus, and that in itself is an important element. The educational campus at Lisanelly, Omagh, has the potential to lead the way and be an example to other areas.

6.15 pm

The joint declaration by the British and Irish Governments promised vacated military sites to local people, and I hope that the powers that be in the Ministry of Defence will live up to that undertaking. Mr Deputy Speaker, forgive me for referring to Forkhill Barracks in my constituency, but that site also offers great potential to provide an integrated project for the local community in the village and beyond.

Opportunities presented by vacated military sites should be part of the peace dividend. In the past, we heard much about that; however, recently, we have heard little, and to date our communities have not seen much of that dividend. The Lisanelly project is an opportunity to provide those communities with at least part of it.

In the Assembly and the Government institutions here, we are, I hope, in the process of transforming our society through the normalisation of relationships. What better way could there be to advance that process than by transforming past symbols of conflict into beacons of hope for sharing, collaboration, co-operation and future interdependence. We should all work together in order to ensure that the Omagh campus vision becomes a reality for the people of that area.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This debate is important, and I wish to commend my colleague Barry McElduff for providing the opportunity to debate the prospects for transforming the former military base in Omagh into a new educational campus. I also wish to thank all the parties, because there is clearly cross-party support, and I wish to reiterate Pat Doherty's words, by which he outlined the results of the various meetings that he attended. He clearly understands the difficulties that we face, and we must follow the lead taken by the educationalists in Omagh and put all our shoulders to the wheel in order to secure that military site and the costs to maintain it. That educational campus must be built.

I welcome the fact that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have also attempted to secure the gifting of the sites with British Government Ministers, and we await the outcome of those endeavours. I welcome the fact that Tom Buchanan's party leader, the First Minister, continues to press the British Government strongly, and I was delighted to hear yesterday's responses to questions for oral answer.

Although I cannot discuss Executive business, we have also been considering the gifting of military sites — Michelle Gildernew in relation to Forkhill, and Margaret Ritchie and other Ministers in relation to other sites.

Such projects are the way forward for education. This morning, I made a statement about area-based planning, which Members have mentioned, and this project ticks all the boxes: area-based planning; collaboration; every school must be a good school; the curriculum's broad base; the enriched curriculum; the entitlement framework in relation to choices for ages 14, post-14 and post-16; access to choices; and sustainable schools.

As mar Aire Oideachais — as Minister of Education — I believe that this site presents a unique opportunity for education in Omagh and to turn a former symbol of conflict into a new source of hope and achievement for the future. We have the real prospect of a shared educational campus, in which schools will be co-located and be able to collaborate. All options can be envisaged — controlled and maintained, grammar and non-grammar and special schools.

Nothing is beyond the realm of possibility in respect of the project. It offers possibilities for new ways of sharing facilities — and the further-education college is also adjacent to the site, as Barry McElduff said. That is the way in which we should plan education in the future.

Throughout the North, we can learn through the project: Belfast, Derry — everywhere can learn from Omagh. I am sure that the people of Omagh will love

to hear that because, sometimes, the cities believe that only they can lead, whereas, in this case, Omagh will lead. That is fitting. The project represents an exciting prospect, which is shared by many who are involved in education in Omagh. We have a unique opportunity, and we cannot afford to lose it.

Recently, I met a group that was drawn from across the education sectors in Omagh, which was led by Rev Robert Herron and Monsignor Joseph Donnelly, co-chairpersons of the Lisanelly Schools Working Group. That group was accompanied by representatives of Arvalee School and Resource Centre, Omagh Academy, Omagh High School, Sacred Heart College and the Western Education and Library Board. They explained their views and aspirations for an educational campus at Lisanelly, which could, potentially, provide for more than 3,000 pupils, utilising perhaps 70 acres of the 170 acres that are available.

That meeting was held during a time when many Members hosted young people on work experience, and two young people were with me that week: one from the South, and one from the North. One was from Downpatrick, where Kieran Deeny is originally from. I brought them along to that meeting, where various people put forward their views in support of the project. What really struck me afterwards was that the two young students from Downpatrick and Louth said to me how brilliant it was, how glad they were to be at the meeting and how, when the project gets up and running, they want to be invited to the opening. That provided a real sense of hope.

We must find a way to make the project happen. We cannot start by finding problems: we must develop a can-do attitude, as Pat Doherty said. We know one thing: we will not gain anything without fighting for it. We must get into campaign mode for this endeavour.

I know from talking to all the different educational sectors that they are aware that they have to fight for the campus, and they want to fight for it. They are enthusiastic about the benefits that the proposed campus will bring to Omagh. I am tremendously impressed with their commitment — and fair play to them. They led the way when others did not.

Executive Committee support for an educational campus on the Lisanelly site would be the signal for a detailed master-planning exercise. A master plan will help to determine the potential usage, identify areas for attention or disposal, and examine the quality of the housing stock and other buildings. That could lead to the development of a shared educational campus.

All the schools that have expressed an interest will need investment and, for some, there may be no alternative to staying at their present sites. Members have referred to the land that they occupy in Omagh town centre. Lisanelly offers the exciting prospect of

being able to plan buildings in a more co-ordinated and effective way than is normally possible, so that school projects are developed and delivered together, and facilities are planned in a way that allows schools to collaborate and share in delivering education.

There are educational, social and economic benefits from pursuing an education campus together. The relocation of existing schools to Lisanelly will also free up important regeneration sites in other parts of Omagh. I welcome the interest of the Chamber of Commerce as well: its role will obviously be very important.

On previous occasions, I have made it clear that we must develop a more flexible and agile post-primary school system and take account of the full, progressive, education reform agenda that is already being pursued in the North.

I have made it clear I do not advocate a “one size fits all” approach: the campus is an example for which that approach will not work. Rather, I seek to devise an education system whereby children will enjoy access to a range of high-quality choices at critical junctures in their educational development, the most significant of which is at age 14.

The particular way in which young people will access their post-14 pathway will be determined by the planning of education in their local areas. The potential for an education campus at Lisanelly provides a wonderful opportunity for education provision in the greater Omagh area to be shaped to suit the needs of all young people in the community in an innovative way.

The schools are keen to be involved in the future planning of the project. The project can and will feed into the structures that I outlined today, although Irish-medium provision must also be considered. I am sure that that can be brought on board on any future campus.

Members will also be aware of the interest across all sections of the community in Omagh in the acquisition of the former barracks site for education and social and economic regeneration. There is a strong consensus across local political representatives, educational interests and the business and wider community that the development of the site offers enormous potential to transform Omagh for the better. It would require a cross-departmental and cross-agency approach to deliver a unique multifaceted education campus that was linked to further and higher education, health, social regeneration and the local economy. Such opportunities such do not arise often, so they must be fully explored.

As I said, the education budget could not cover the costs of the project. Even with the gifting of the site to the Executive, which is being pursued by the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, costs

would be involved in maintaining and developing it. The Executive must consider how that work would be resourced, and I will bring a paper to the Executive for discussion on the matter because we cannot lose this opportunity. The project ticks all the boxes, and we must all put our shoulder to the wheel. I thank all the parties for their support for that wonderful project. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Adjourned at 6.26 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

I take are the Speaker's advice and counsel only. However, I say again and again that if any Member wishes to submit a question to Commission members for oral answer, that question will be answered.

Monday 10 March 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Ms Ní Chuilín: On a point of order, a Cheann Comhairle. Was the advice given regarding the decision taken last week by the Commission, about the media and cameras in the precincts of Parliament Buildings, in keeping with Standing Orders 69(4), 69(5) and 69(6)?

Mr Speaker: The Assembly Commission met this morning and agreed the terms of broadcasting procedures and the use of media facilities in the basement and in this House. However, those are not matters for the Chamber, and I intend to take no further points of order on the issue. The business of the Commission is the business of the Commission and is not the business of this House.

Mr Durkan: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Although I accept that the business of the Commission has, in general, been the business of the Commission, will there be a review of how Commission business and decisions are reported and reflected in this Chamber? There is a serious anomaly. This is an Assembly of accountability; however, we find that the Assembly Commission is not accountable to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: The Member knows that any Member may submit a question to the Commission to obtain clarity on any issue that is dealt with, or decided upon, by the Commission.

Mr O'Dowd: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It is clear to every one of us that, over the past months, you have carried out your tasks diligently, professionally, and in a manner that has gained respect from all quarters of the House. If, as in this case, the Office of the Speaker appears to have been poorly advised, is there not a danger of that Office becoming a subject of public question, or even ridicule?

Mr Speaker: Let us hope that that is not the case. That is the key to all of it. The advice and counsel that

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Donaldson): I beg to move

That the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

I seek the Assembly's approval of this statutory rule, which transfers the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland (OSNI) from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) to enable it to become part of the Land and Property Services agency. This statutory rule is made under powers conferred by article 8 of the Departments (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, which prescribes that the Order should be made by the First Minister and deputy First Minister and that it is subject to the affirmative resolution of the Assembly.

The transfer is a result of a written ministerial statement made by former Secretary of State Peter Hain on 21 March 2006, which included the decision to transfer the functions of the Valuation and Lands Agency (VLA), the Rate Collection Agency (RCA), the Land Registers of Northern Ireland (LRNI) and the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland to a single land and property services agency.

To put the transfer in context, the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland became part of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure after devolution in 1999. That was achieved by transferring responsibility for the provisions of the Boundary Survey (Ireland) Act 1854 — except section 15 — as well as section 1 of the Administrative Provisions Act (Northern Ireland) 1933, from the Department of the Environment to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure under the Departments (Transfer and Assignment of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 1999.

The relevant provisions of the 1854 Act concern the survey of townland and barony boundaries. The provisions of the 1933 Act relate to, and I quote from the Act:

“the public service in connection with the Ordnance Survey in Northern Ireland”.

OSNI's long-standing role is to provide a definitive mapping service for Northern Ireland. In more recent years, that role has centred on the provision of digital mapping data to a wide range of public- and private-sector organisations. The mapping data is used to improve policy-making and service delivery in a wide range of fields including emergency services,

agriculture, education and the financial services sector. The Department of Finance and Personnel is the parent Department of the Land and Property Services agency, and as Ordnance Survey for Northern Ireland currently resides in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, it is necessary to, once again, transfer the statutory responsibilities; this time from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Phase 1 of the Land and Property Services Agency is now established following the dissolution and amalgamation of the Rate Collection Agency and the Valuation and Lands Agency into the newly created Land and Property Services agency on 1 April 2007. Phase 2 will provide for the transfer of the Land Registers of Northern Ireland from the Department of Finance and Personnel and, subject to the approval of the Assembly, the transfer of the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, to the new agency with effect from 1 April 2008.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister made the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 on 6 February 2008, and if affirmed by the Assembly, it will come into operation on 1 April 2008.

The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, having consulted the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Committee for Finance and Personnel, is content with the proposed transfer. The incorporation of the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland into the Land and Property Services agency will support the Executive's commitment under the reform and modernisation agenda to rationalise and improve the delivery of public services.

The amalgamation will combine related land and property functions and will streamline and improve the delivery of services to the public.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister supports the motion to approve the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008.

As the junior Minister said, the Order provides for the transfer of the functions of the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to the Department of Finance and Personnel, thereby enabling the Ordnance Survey to become part of Land and Property Services. My Committee's responsibility for scrutinising the Order comes as a result of Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's (OFMDFM) responsibility for legislation that relates to the functions of Departments. My Committee was initially briefed on the rule on 12

December 2007, and we wrote to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Committee for Finance and Personnel, which are responsible for scrutinising the agencies being brought together via the Order. Both Committees indicated that they were content with the proposals in the draft Order. On 20 February 2008, my Committee formally considered the draft Order alongside the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules and agreed to recommend that it be affirmed by the Assembly.

My Committee wishes to see action being taken to reduce the number of public bodies in Northern Ireland. On Wednesday, my Committee will take evidence from OFMDFM officials on the progress being made by Departments in reducing the number of quangos — currently 81 — in Northern Ireland. At the same meeting, the Committee will also take evidence on OFMDFM proposals to introduce a public authorities reform Bill, which will seek to make a further reduction in the number of public bodies. The Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 is a small step in the review of public administration commitment to the reduction of excessive public administration; it is, nevertheless, worthy of our support.

Mr Shannon: The Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland derives a substantial income from its mapping work for developers and Government bodies. Will the junior Minister reassure the House that OSNI will be able to deliver and enhance its work as an agency of the Department of Finance and Personnel?

Mr Donaldson: I thank both Members for their contributions this afternoon. I thank the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and its Chairperson, Mr Kennedy, for their support and the time that they took to scrutinise the Order and ensure that it complies with our overall objectives. The Committee's support for the Order is appreciated. The Chairperson is absolutely right; Members on this side of the House are committed to a reduction in the level of bureaucracy and the cost of Government in Northern Ireland. The motivation behind the Order is to streamline services into one agency, and we are convinced that that will produce a more effective, more efficient and less expensive service. The public must be given the cost-effective service that it requires.

I thank my friend the Member for Strangford Jim Shannon for his question. The operation of the new agency will be a matter for my colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel. However, I assure the Member that the motivation behind the Order is to ensure not only that the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland delivers an effective service to the public through the new arrangement but that it does so efficiently.

12.15 pm

We hope that the savings accruing from the new agency will be used to enhance what is available to the public through the Land and Property Services agency. Those are matters that the Minister of Finance and Personnel will consider when the transfer arrangements have been completed.

Phase 1 of the Land and Property Services agency is now in place; phase 2 will make it complete, with the transfer of LRNI and OSNI to the agency. The amalgamation of those services will streamline the organisation, improving the delivery of services to the public. The work of OSNI will continue to flourish as part of the new agency. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. There has been a serious incident in the centre of our city. Scaffolding has collapsed at the old Northern Bank at the junction of Victoria Street and May Street. The collapse occurred as concrete was being poured in for a new floor. Six people are injured — some seriously — and a number of other people are unaccounted for. There are concerns that more of the building may collapse. Special recovery teams and dogs have been brought in, and traffic is at a standstill around much of Belfast. Our sympathies are with those who have suffered, and we wish well those who are engaged in rescue work. We hope that all the missing people will be accounted for soon.

There has also been an accident in County Tyrone — close to where the bus accident took place last week — and another child has been injured and taken to hospital. These are tragedies; I trust that out of the darkness may come some light and some comfort for us all.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member very much, even though that was not a point of order. Members need a procedure for the House whereby they can raise such important issues. I hope that the Procedures Committee will examine that possibility fairly soon. Our thoughts and prayers are indeed with the victims. I hope — and I am sure — that the appropriate Ministers are listening. However, the House needs a system to allow every Member to raise issues of deep concern such as these.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Motor Vehicles (Wearing of Seat Belts) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008

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

That the Motor Vehicles (Wearing of Seat Belts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

The power to require persons to wear seat belts while travelling in a motor vehicle on a road is contained in article 23 of the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and in the Motor Vehicles (Wearing of Seat Belts) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993. The legislation also enables an exemption to be made in the case of users of certain delivery or collection vehicles.

The original intention of the legislation was to allow an exception to be made for those who need to make frequent stops during deliveries, such as milkmen, postmen, refuse collectors and so on. Article 23 as originally drafted, and the 1993 regulations in their current form, refer to this activity as “making local rounds”. However, the limited extent of the exception has not been well understood, and many goods-vehicle users believe that the exception applies to any delivery or collection, over any distance.

Therefore, to provide clarity, article 23 of the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 was amended by the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 to provide for the prescription of the maximum journey distance over which such an exception would apply. The opportunity was also taken to replace the reference to “users of vehicles” with the more precise reference to:

“the driver of, or a passenger in, a motor vehicle”.

The statutory rule that is before the Assembly for affirmation accordingly amends the existing Motor Vehicles (Wearing of Seat Belts) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993 to provide an exception from the need to wear a seat belt in the case of a driver or a passenger in a goods vehicle, while engaged in delivery or collection duties, where the distance of the journey does not exceed 50 m. That will help prevent any future ambiguity. The amendment, which is routine and non-controversial in nature, will also help to improve road safety.

My Department consulted formally on this issue from 1 June 2004 to 24 August 2004, and the views expressed largely supported the recommended change. Although differing distances had been suggested, some consultees recommended that, to avoid confusion, the distance prescribed should be in line with that in Great Britain.

DOE officials and the Police Service of Northern Ireland considered that a distance of 50 m, as

prescribed in Great Britain, was both reasonable and appropriate for Northern Ireland and should enable those engaged in genuine door-to-door deliveries or collections to benefit from that exemption.

Furthermore, I sought comments from Executive colleagues, in December 2007, on my proposals to clarify the application of the exemption by replacing it with one that will be more readily understood. I am pleased to report that I received no negative responses.

A regulatory impact assessment has been completed, but as this change only clarifies what was meant by a “local round” in the existing exemption, no extra costs to any stakeholders or the Government have been identified.

There are no additional costs for vehicle operators, as users are already required to wear seat belts when delivering or collecting. The majority of vehicles involved are already fitted with seat belts, and the legislation does not require installation of seat belts where they are not already required to be fitted.

In conclusion, the likelihood of a driver or passenger being killed in a collision greatly increases if the person is not wearing a seat belt, and this legislation is being brought forward as there is no valid reason why the lives of delivery drivers and passengers travelling more than 50 m between stops should continue to be put at risk through failure to use seat belts. That is why, today, I propose that this statutory rule be affirmed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Motor Vehicles (Wearing of Seat Belts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

Taxis Bill

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that under Standing Order 35(2) the Further Consideration Stage of a Bill is restricted to debating any further amendments to the Bill. As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Taxis Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at the Bill’s Final Stage.

The Further Consideration Stage of the Taxis Bill (NIA 4/07) is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Statutory Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is the motion on the membership of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. As with other similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Raymond McCartney replace Mr Paul Maskey as a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. — [*Ms Ní Chuilín*]

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and published in the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for the winding-up speech.

Mr Burnside: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give their full support and co-operation to the operations of the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past.

Dealing with the past is one of the most difficult problems that any society has to tackle, particularly following the conflict, death, violence and terrorism that existed in this Province for around 35 years.

I will qualify my remarks — and I have discussed this widely with my colleagues in the Ulster Unionist group — in asking the First Minister and deputy First Minister to co-operate with the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past, we do not wish to propose a corporate Ulster version of 20, 50 or 100 Bloody Sunday inquiries in this Province. The Bloody Sunday Inquiry is costing about £200 million. I predict that for those who were shot on the day, for the Parachute Regiment and for all who were concerned with events on that day a long time ago, there will be no conclusion that pleases the victims, as they see themselves, or the Parachute Regiment. The £200 million spent on the inquiry would have been better spent on schools and hospitals. Therefore, I am not recommending that we set up a hundred times the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, with no time limit and no cost limit. Such a situation would be ludicrous.

However, we do have to try to deal with the past. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister symbolises, through its two individual members, Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness, a major part of the history of the conflict. The First Minister and deputy First Minister, Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness, must be prepared to tell the truth about their part in the conflict. We support the SDLP amendment: we have no problems with it.

Mrs D Kelly: On a point of order —

Mr Burnside: I am sorry, but let me get into the thrust of my argument. The First Minister and deputy First Minister must be prepared to tell the truth. The First Minister was in his normal, old-fashioned

aggressive style when I raised this matter during Question Time a couple of weeks ago. In response to my question that there should be no equivalence between victims and perpetrators of violence, he said:

“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.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 27, p188, col 1].*

That may be the way that the First Minister talks to his party colleagues: he does not talk to David Burnside in that way, because I know the history of the conflict. If the First Minister wishes to reveal the past, let him start to reveal the past and his contribution to the Troubles. Let us go back to the Ulster Protestant Volunteers in 1966 when Bill Craig proscribed Sinn Féin and the UVF to try to avert that celebration of the 1916 uprising.

Let us also remember the later contribution of the First Minister. I see history being totally rewritten in this Province. I was in the Vanguard headquarters in Hawthornden Road during the Ulster Workers' Council strike and was proud to be there. Ian Paisley was in Canada; so, a johnny-come-lately of Ulster Resistance. Many of us were in and around this Chamber — not as elected Members — in 1975, when Ian Paisley brought down the possibility of a voluntary coalition of five unionists, two SDLP members and one Alliance Party member that could have, perhaps — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Burnside: Perhaps we could have pulled ourselves out of the conflict at that stage in the mid-1970s and not have had the 25 to 30 years since of conflict —

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Burnside: No, I am not giving way to Paisleyites or republicans today. As we move on through the days of the Troubles — and Ulster Resistance — the image of unionism was damaged nationally, in Europe and internationally by the undermining of unionist leaders: the worst description, the language, the venom and the vitriol. Jim Molyneux — whatever one thinks of him; an honourable and decent traditional unionist — was called, in 1985, Judas Iscariot. Is that the language that should have been used for a man who served his country in war and peace? I do not think so. That language was not conducive to good relations in this Province. *[Interruption.]*

Mrs I Robinson: You went into Government with Sinn Féin.

Mr Speaker: Order, order. The Member has the Floor. All other Members will have the opportunity to speak, if they wish to do so.

12.30 pm

Mr Burnside: He undermined every unionist leader. Carson and Craigavon would have found his language

and behaviour unsavoury. While I do not say that there was blood on his hands, there was blood on his tongue. He did serious damage to the image of unionism in this Province for 35 or 40 years.

Let me turn to the deputy First Minister. We seek truth. I wish that Martin McGuinness was here. Are we going to have the truth told? Only last week or the week before, he said that he would have gone around Derry — Londonderry, the Maiden City — after Bloody Sunday and shot every British soldier around. When are we going to have the truth? In 1972, the year of Bloody Sunday, 27 members of the security forces were murdered by the Provisional IRA in Derry. Is he going to reveal the truth?

I was with the family of Marcus McCausland last week. He was a UDR officer from Dreenagh who was tortured and murdered by the IRA at the beginning of the Troubles. Under whose command? The deputy First Minister's. Can we have the truth? Will the truth be revealed?

I can go through the different periods using 'Lost Lives'. All the figures have been published — if we are to have the truth, let us go through the truth. The Provisional IRA was responsible for the deaths of 639 civilians, 454 British soldiers, 273 members of the RUC and RUC Reserve, 181 members of the UDR and the Royal Irish Regiment, 151 members of the IRA or other republicans — good at killing their own — 30 loyalists, 20 prison officers, seven guards in the South, six British policemen, and seven others, making a total of 1,768 killed. If we are to have a truth inquiry, or some form of structure for dealing with the past, let it be a structure wherein people will admit what they were involved in. I am told that the president of Sinn Féin was not a member of the IRA — what sort of joke society are we living in?

Many of us were involved in the conflict. We did not do everything right, and we did not do everything wrong. There were major players in the conflict over the past 35 years who made a major contribution to the problems. My colleagues and I are very concerned that we might set up a conflict-resolution industry in Northern Ireland. There is a considerable element of that already operating.

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

Please let Mr Eames and Mr Bradley, in their co-operation with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, try to deal with the past in a proper way. Will the First and deputy First Ministers give their full support to the Historical Enquiries Team (HET)? Is that unit really carrying out investigations into the crimes of the last 35 years? Are the weapons that are being held in Carrickfergus being tested for the DNA of the commanders of the Provisional IRA, the INLA and the loyalist paramilitaries? If there is proper DNA

testing and a proper investigation of historical crimes by the PSNI, those people should take part and tell the truth.

Mrs I Robinson: "No guns, no Government".

Mr Burnside: Do not talk to me about "No guns, no Government". On the last —

Mr Kennedy: You must have seen the guns, Iris, have you?

Mrs I Robinson: Yes.

Mr Kennedy: Good girl.

Mr Burnside: You would be as well to keep quiet on this one, Iris. Historical crimes and victims — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Burnside has the Floor.

Mr Burnside: I plead with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given all that they contributed to the conflict, to give a full commitment to the Eames/Bradley group. It should not be a massive, no-timescale, no-cost-limit truth and reconciliation programme: but will the Ministers co-operate on historic crimes? Most importantly, will they look after the victims, the victims' groups, the civilians, the widows and orphans — especially of members of the security forces — and the innocent Catholics killed for being in the wrong areas of Belfast? Will they co-operate with that? A truth and reconciliation inquiry is worth debating here today, and I hope that Eames and Bradley will be given full co-operation by the First and the deputy First Ministers. The truth will set us free; I hope that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister will tell the truth.

Mr Attwood: I beg to move the following amendment: Insert after the second "Minister"

"the two Governments; the army, intelligence and police services; the paramilitary organisations including those who directed and controlled those organisations; all the political parties; and all others who can assist,".

Mr Deputy Speaker, I apologise to you and to the House — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Attwood: I apologise, because I have to leave the Chamber as soon as I move the amendment; I do not mean any disrespect to the Chamber or to the motion, but, for personal reasons, I have to leave.

I welcome Mr Burnside's comment that the Ulster Unionist Party will accept the SDLP amendment, and I look forward to other parties doing likewise.

In anticipation of what some Members might say in the debate — and considering that dealing with the past is a difficult and perilous matter — it is important that whatever mechanism is developed to deal with the past is as rigorous, representative and wholesome as

possible. The SDLP, therefore, recognised that there was a need to deal with the past, but it expressed caution about the establishment of the Eames/Bradley group. Our reservations were due, partly, to the fact that it was sourced in the Secretary of State's office and Downing Street and, partly, because members of the consultative group had made comments about the past with which the SDLP disagreed. For instance, with regard to on-the-run state killings legislation a number of years ago, Mr Denis Bradley — a man who deserves support for many of the things that he has done in the North — said that the British Government should go the whole hog and impose amnesties. The SDLP does not agree with that sentiment.

The party, therefore, expressed caution and vigilance about the proposed initiative to deal with the past. However, whatever about the parentage of the Eames/Bradley group, people — including Members — should consider afresh what it is trying to do now. Several observations can be made about the Eames/Bradley group as a commission. It is clear that, whatever we felt about what one or other individual in the group might have thought, the thinking on the consultative group has broadened significantly beyond any of our preconceptions. That thinking may expand to what we think should arise from the Eames/Bradley group's proposals later this year.

Considering that the Eames/Bradley group has been able to look into certain dark places — including the state's obligation and responsibility for conflict and death in this part of the world — it has seen the enormity of the wrongs that have been perpetrated. Consequently, the group has the potential to produce more broad-based and profound recommendations than was the case heretofore.

When a group such as the Eames/Bradley group has met 70, 80 or 90 victims' organisations — as it has done over the past few months — it is inevitable that that will impact on their thinking. From speaking to the Eames/Bradley group, I know that they were impressed and touched by the narrative of the Ballymurphy families of those who were murdered some months before Bloody Sunday, for instance. Those families told the stories of what they had experienced and the truths that had not been told about that atrocity. Therefore, I have a sense that the Eames/Bradley group — whatever it may have been previously — now has hold of a narrative of the conflict of the past 30 to 40 years that means that its recommendations may move to deeper, bigger and bolder mechanisms for dealing with the past.

For those reasons, the Eames/Bradley group deserves a second look from those who may be hostile, and a broader recognition that it may be fulfilling a difficult job, as Mr Burnside said, in a more broad-based and inclusive way than might have been first

thought. However, there are good grounds to be cautious that, over the next few months, the Eames/Bradley group will be unpicked by those who are threatened by it.

To some degree, that unpicking will result from the wounds that were self-inflicted after the Eames/Bradley group briefed the media in January, when amnesty was mentioned and there was debate on whether there had been a war in the North.

However, more fundamentally, some people are threatened by the fact that the consultative group has looked in dark places. Consequently, those who have lurked in those dark places over the past 30 or 40 years are confused, and they are anxious that the Eames/Bradley group may say that there should be disclosure about a great deal of past events. In my judgement, even though the initiative to establish the group may have been sourced by the British Government, elements of that Government are now anxious about the group, given that it has had sight — to whatever degree — of the report of the Stevens Inquiry and knows about all the devastation on which that inquiry reported. It is clear that the republican movement — the IRA in particular — is threatened by the Eames/Bradley group. That is the reason that it was reported a couple of weeks ago that it was highly unlikely that the IRA would engage meaningfully with the consultative group.

There are reasons for concluding that, regardless of where the consultative group was six months ago, it is now in a different place. As a result, it may be unpicked over the next three or four months because of the attitude of those who have a vested interest in, and the most reason for, covering up the horrors of the past: those who are accountable for what the leaders of the Army, police, security services and paramilitary did over the past 30 or 40 years.

If, as a society, we are going to move forward —

Mrs I Robinson: Shame on you.

Mr Attwood: If Mrs Robinson has anything to say to me, instead of to other Members, I will give way to her. However, if she has nothing to say to me, I ask for her silence.

Mrs I Robinson: I was attacking the Ulster Unionists.

Mr Attwood: If the Member is not going to speak to me, I ask for her silence.

The SDLP believes that — *[Interruption.]*

Mr T Clarke: Having read the amendment, I was wondering whether the Member will clarify whether he supports an amnesty. If so, will the Ulster Unionist Party also support it?

Mr Attwood: I am glad that the Member raised that point. If he reads anything about the matter, he will

realise that amnesty cannot be granted. That is because it offends against international good practice and law. Therefore, it is erroneous to believe that the consultative group will say that general amnesty should be granted to all those who have perpetrated wrongs in the past. The group knows — as should we all — that general amnesty cannot be granted. Even though there can be specific —

Mr T Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: No.

Even though amnesty can be granted on a specific case-by-case basis, general amnesty cannot be granted, even in those circumstances for grave matters. We know of all the past grave crimes for which nobody in their right mind would grant a case-by-case amnesty. We should therefore challenge everybody who has knowledge of certain events to co-operate with the consultative group and to account for their past.

In its manifesto of a year ago, Sinn Féin said that it would continue to highlight collusion. It also said that it would urge the British Government to disclose to affected families all the information that they have on collusion and state murder. Yet, in the same manifesto, Sinn Féin is silent about applying exactly the same principle to the IRA, an organisation that, over the 30 or 40 years of conflict, killed nearly 1,800 people. Therefore, I ask Sinn Féin Members to think about this question during the debate: if they believe on principle that the British Government must disclose to families all the information that they have on murder, do they accept, in principle, that the IRA and loyalist groups are obliged in exactly the same way to disclose to other families all the information that they have on certain murders?

12.45 pm

If we are to have a better future, the leaders of those organisations that were involved in the past 30 or 40 years must be accountable. That includes not only chiefs of staff of the IRA or commanders of loyalist organisations, but living directors general of MI5, living chief constables of the RUC and living general officers commanding of the British Army. If those people made themselves answerable, accountability for the past might at long last emerge.

Mr Simpson: I listened with interest to Mr Burnside's opening comments. I was glad that the Deputy Speaker allowed him to get his head and say what he had to — a Member who rarely attends or speaks in the Assembly deserves to say what he wants. The situation reminds me of an old country saying that those in the farming community will know: a young calf, seeing the daylight for the first time, goes berserk, loses control of itself and does not know what it is doing.

I find it difficult to support the motion. It gives the consultative group a blank cheque, and, if I have time, I hope to expand on that point.

The Government gave the group an important job to do. In cases in which assistance can be given to those who are innocent of all crime or wrongdoing but who nonetheless were targeted for murder by terror organisations, such help ought to be given. However, there can be no doubt that several factors hindered the work of the Eames/Bradley consultative group. First is the despicable suggestion that the Troubles be reclassified as a war and that there should be an amnesty for those who come forward to speak about the role that they played in the Troubles. That matter was debated in the Chamber some time ago, and on that occasion Mr Burnside said:

“What happened was not a war; it was an insurrection against the legitimate state: the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 27, p405, col 2*].

That illustrates that the Member who moved the motion is already on record as stating that he is against some of the major suggestions that have emerged from the Eames/Bradley consultative group.

However, other factors have hindered the work of the group. For example, the manner in which the suggestion was made to reclassify as a war undermined the group seriously. The group was divided over that suggestion. We must bear in mind what occurred when the press was being briefed on that matter: one part of the group was briefing against another. In effect, one of those parts sought to use the press to get its view of the Troubles and of any potential amnesty into the public domain as a way to spike internal opposition to that suggestion. As such, serious question marks hang over the group's ability to deliver. The group is divided, and those divisions are being played out in the press over the issue of victims. Considering those disgusting recommendations and the fact that internal divisions were used in that way, I cannot but ask myself how such a situation could ever have emerged.

I must also ask exactly what role those who are at the centre of this organisation played in such proposals. I remember well the despicable actions of ECONI (Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland) at the time of the referendum campaign on the Belfast Agreement. I remember how that body produced a document justifying the early release of those bloodthirsty and ruthless sectarian killers, twisting the scriptures in so doing. When I consider the Eames/Bradley consultative group, I recognise the influence that ECONI has at its top table.

I freely confess that I shudder to think that people who have that kind of track record are involved in the consultative group.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Simpson: I will not give way; I am nearly finished.

Therefore, there are problems with some aspects of the Eames/Bradley consultative group.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Simpson: No, I will not give way: the Member will get his turn to speak, and I have a few seconds left.

It is likely that Mr Burnside's motives for tabling the motion resulted from concern that the IRA has refused to co-operate with the consultative group on the ground that its members have been appointed by the UK Government. However, listening to Mr Burnside's ranting and raving, one can barely understand what he is getting at.

That would be an honourable motive, and there should be no barrier to republicans' working with the group. After all, Conor Murphy, Michelle Gildernew and Caitríona Ruane are administering Departments that have been devolved to them by that same UK Government. They administer budgets from the UK Government and exercise power granted to them by the UK Government under statutes passed by the UK Government in the Houses of Parliament.

The wording of the motion leaves a lot to be desired, and I urge the House to reject it.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I oppose the motion and the amendment. The Consultative Group on the Past, although having genuine people with integrity in its membership, was undermined from the start by being established by the British Government. I do not believe that the Eames/Bradley group, as it is called, is the way forward in the search for truth. That is also the view of many relatives' organisations and victims' groups.

No one should have anything to fear from a genuine truth-recovery process. However, such a process is doomed to fail if it is constructed by, or has its terms of reference set by, the British Government. That is why the Eames/Bradley approach is so flawed.

Accountability, truth and justice are paramount for all those who were victims — and I mean everyone who was a victim or a survivor — of the conflict. However, the British state must also recognise its role in the conflict and acknowledge that it too had a strong part to play. No truth-recovery process can be completely open and fair unless it is set up in an independent and transparent manner and is not affiliated to any of the protagonists.

Sinn Féin supports the setting up of a victim-led, independent international body. Families who are the victims of state violence and collusion will not feel that they are being treated as equals until their loved ones who died are recognised as victims of the conflict

and are treated the same as those who were killed by republican organisations.

The B-Specials, British Army, UDR, RUC and unionist paramilitaries were responsible for many injuries and deaths. The British state, either directly through the deployment of Crown forces or indirectly by arming and directing unionist death squads, was responsible for killing 1,414 people, including men, women and children. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Paisley Jnr: What about the IRA?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Ms J McCann: Over the years, more and more evidence of direct Crown force involvement with unionist paramilitaries has emerged. However, the ruthless and random nature of the campaign of collusion, and the fact that it went right to the door of the British Cabinet, has never been exposed. The campaign was the result of careful organisation and planning and could not have happened without direct state involvement.

It was not until Pat Finucane, a human rights lawyer, was murdered that the level of state collusion in the murder of Irish citizens began to be exposed. It was clear that the British state, in the guise of the British Army, the RUC and the UDR, planned and instigated the murder of Pat Finucane and facilitated his execution. A photograph and address were supplied, weapons were procured, and roadblocks were removed at the last moment to ensure a clean getaway for his killers.

I have worked with some of the families whose loved ones were killed by the state, and I know how angry and aggrieved they are that their loved ones — and they themselves — are constantly demonised and made to feel like second-class citizens, and that their pain and grief do not matter.

Mr McFarland: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: No; you have had your say. *[Laughter.]*

People on all sides of the conflict must be open to that, and all participants — including the British state — must take responsibility for their actions over the past 35 years. I was pleased to hear David Burnside saying that there were many players in the conflict.

Now is the time to establish an international independent body, with the resources necessary to investigate the past and recover the truth for all the relatives whose loved ones died in the conflict. Any other such process would not be fair or equal and would make people feel that they were being treated as second-class citizens. Go raibh maith agat.

Dr Farry: I fear that this debate will not reflect well on the Assembly. At a time in which the Northern

Ireland people are expecting us to be getting down to the business of building a better future for all, ding-dongs among the unionist parties, among the nationalist parties and across the Chamber do not serve that purpose. The enthusiasm with which some Members are engaging in this debate, compared to their lack of engagement in legislation on a way forward, reflects poorly on them. Rather than erecting obstacles, Members must face up to the challenge of ensuring that past issues are dealt with sensitively and responsibly.

The Alliance Party will support the motion and the amendment, although, no doubt, it will be concerned about some Members' comments. For some time, dealing with the past has been a missing element in the Northern Ireland peace process. Arguably, the matter should have been considered long ago, and it is regrettable that we are only now getting round to it.

Sinn Féin's Jennifer McCann has a problem with how the Eames/Bradley group was set up — it is the only show in town, and there will not be another means with which to deal with that matter. Therefore, if Members are serious about dealing with the past, let us engage with that group as it stands rather than dreaming up future mythical bodies. We must grasp the nettle now.

Until now, the problems of dealing with the past have been handled piecemeal, and that has damaged our society's ability to move forward and build reconciliation. Such a process must be consistent with building a shared future.

Attention must be given to several additional matters: a day of reflection, on which people can build as they see fit; memorials, over which, given events in past weeks, the Assembly is struggling and concerning which we have created a major long-term problem; the demand for a forum at which people will be able to tell their stories and have those stories placed on the record; and, perhaps the most thorny issue, truth recovery. Of course, no truth-recovery proposals will attract universal buy-in; however, it is important that such proposals are devised as, and considered part of, an overall package.

Members must also reflect on the imminent appointment of members to a victims' commission, rather than the former Victims' Commissioner. Some people believe that the victims' commission will be capable of handling the matter of dealing with the past. However, it is important to draw a distinction between, on the one hand, the Eames/Bradley group's aims, which concern society-wide issues of where we have come from and how we can move forward; and, on the other hand, dealing with the concerns of individual victims who, for the past 30 to 40 years, have been disgracefully neglected. Those people deserve relief, by means of proper financial compensation and by

ensuring that proper services are in place to deal with their needs. Given OFMDFM's responsibilities in this matter, I am concerned that that Department is not represented in the Chamber to respond to the points raised in the debate.

It will be necessary to encourage people to come forward in order to co-operate with any truth-recovery process, and the notion that the state's actions can be entirely uncovered is unrealistic. However, organisations do have a role to play, most notably the IRA and loyalist paramilitaries, which must come forward to discuss their actions. In addition, I daresay that some political parties here have other matters that they need to put on the record.

It is worth putting on record that although both unionist parties are having their own internal row about who was the worst offender, they have, at different times over the past 30 to 40 years, quite deliberately tried to subvert the state. Let us not duck that issue: those parties have questions to answer in that respect.

1.00 pm

When it comes to providing incentives to people to come forward, I fear that we may have missed the boat, not least with the failure to link the early release of paramilitary prisoners with wider issues. In that context, there has been a leak from the commission regarding ideas about the recognition of a war and the consideration of an amnesty. My party clearly rejects both those notions. It is important to ensure that justice can remain to be done and that history is not rewritten.

Lord Morrow: This is an interesting debate, and as I listen to those who have contributed already, I begin to wonder about the real motives of the proposer of the motion. It is good that he comes here once in a while. It is remarkable that he has such concern about this matter, for he is seldom here and he refuses to serve on a single Assembly Committee — he is too busy doing other things. I do not know what we owe this motion to, but we are delighted to have the Member here, and we will have to acknowledge his appearance once in a while.

He has proposed a motion that is, to say the least, quite confusing. From its first utterances, the Consultative Group on the Past set down markers as to the direction in which it wanted to go. I suspect that it has sought not so much to find a way whereby victims could be dealt with in a proper and right manner, but, rather, to deal with the perpetrators. That is amazing; but that is society at large, and it is the way that human beings turn out. The current situation is that everything seems to revolve around those who carried out the atrocities — do not worry about the victims; they are just victims. The current line of thought seems to be that the victims just have to pick up the pieces and go on.

The early utterances of the Consultative Group on the Past did not set down markers that it was on the

side of the victims. It asked whether the past could be dealt with by having the situation declared as a war — a war? If that were to happen, what would the group's next move be? I suspect that it would be to ask whether the perpetrators could be given an amnesty. We had one dose of amnesty in this country that sickened everyone to the pits of their stomachs. We saw prisoners who were given an amnesty walking out of prison in the most triumphalist way. Quite frankly, I do not believe that the community in Northern Ireland, no matter from which side of the spectrum, is up for another dose of that. We have had it once, and we have seen the results.

It is one thing to be repentant of one's crimes; it is quite another for prisoners to walk out of a prison having been told by the consultative group that what they did in the past was as part of a war. It was no such thing. It was nothing short of sheer bigotry by intolerant terrorists who ethnically cleansed the border areas and drove people from their homes. The Eames/Bradley group may feel that it can put another one over on the whole community, but in the ruthless campaign of the past 35 years, there have been innocent victims on both sides, and my condemnation is equal, and always has been. In the 35 years that I have been in public life, I have never said that one side was more victimised than the other. Innocent people on both sides of the community were slaughtered — there is no other word that can be used.

Mr T Clarke: The Member referred to a previous amnesty. Perhaps he will come to that later, but will he highlight who brought about the first amnesty in Northern Ireland?

Lord Morrow: That is a salient point. I must refer to Mr Burnside, because he was at pains to castigate my party. He was conspicuous by his silence when he should have told the House that it was his party that signed up to the amnesty for terrorists to be freed back onto the streets. Mr Burnside is not responding to that comment, so I presume that he accepts that that was the situation. It is up to him to say whether he still thinks that that was the right decision. I will give way to him if he wants to address the issue. I notice that he is not taking up the cudgels, because he knows it to be absolutely true.

It is significant that the Minister who is absent today — Conor Murphy — seems to have a direct line to the IRA.

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

Lord Morrow: That is a pity.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I reject the motion and the amendment. They were proposed to be divisive, and they have succeeded in being so. Judging by the SDLP's amendment, I think that it does not understand the role of the Eames/

Bradley Consultative Group on the Past, or, according to Mr Attwood, it has rewritten the group's remit.

Mr McClarty: The Member said that the motion is divisive. Was last week's event celebrating the life of Mairéad Farrell meant to bring people together?

Mr Molloy: If people were forward-looking and were dealing with the past in a collective way, that event could have brought people together. However, people chose to be divisive and to ignore the past. We are talking today about the Consultative Group on the Past, yet minds are closed about how we can deal with the past. Therefore, I take the Member's point.

The consultative group cannot be independent, because it was set up by, and reports to, the British Government. Therefore, the group's report will be ignored in the same way as the Sampson Report, the Stalker Report and others were ignored by the British Government. Not only did the British Government ignore some of those reports, but they put them down, and shot the messengers, to ensure that they would be unable to participate in any further inquiries. If the British Government were intent on dealing with the truth, they would have dealt with those inquiries.

Talks at Weston Park resulted in agreement on the establishment of independent, international inquiries into some deaths, including that of Pat Finucane. However, the independent and international aspect of those inquiries disappeared completely after those talks. There has been much talk about victims and their role, yet their wishes have been ignored, and they have been omitted from the consultative group. Their demand for an independent, international inquiry has been written out of the equation completely, and the British Government have acted as if they are the authority on setting up inquiries, which they are not. They are not neutral by any means; they are combatants and were involved in the conflict situation. They directed their own forces, set up loyalist murder squads, armed them and colluded with them to ensure that the right people were taken out. They encouraged others to murder the citizens over whom they claimed to have jurisdiction, but they reject that line.

The British Government should explain the truth about what they were involved in. They are the Government, so there is nothing to stop them from doing that. They could have ended the Bloody Sunday Inquiry very quickly by simply admitting the truth about their involvement in Bloody Sunday. That would have been a simple line from the British Government, but that would have tied them back to the British Cabinet, in the same way that the murder of Pat Finucane was directed back to the British Cabinet, and they did not want to accept responsibility for that.

There can be no hierarchy of victims. Some people in the Chamber would like to say that one person was a

victim and another was not, but there can be no hierarchy. The conflict went on in this country; the issues involved went right across the board, and the British Government were clearly the masters of all sides of it. We must expose all that in order to ensure that we get to the truth.

The Consultative Group on the Past has said that it does not envisage holding inquiries, talking to victims or suggesting anything more than a mechanism to move the situation forward. That is why the SDLP amendment is wrong; it does not deal with the issue of what the Consultative Group on the Past was supposed to do in the first place.

Let us have what we really require — an independent, international inquiry that will get to the truth of the matter and treat all victims equally, so that we can move forward.

Those who are charged with examining the past and exposing the truth have an important role. However, in looking into the past, we should learn lessons on how to create a vision for the future. We, in the Chamber, have an opportunity to ensure that the Eames/Bradley group is set aside. It was a transitional measure — a talking shop — and a way of putting down the victims. Let us move towards a situation in which we can get to the real truth of the issue.

Mr Paisley Jnr: The Member for South Antrim Mr Burnside opened the debate by qualifying exactly what his motion said and by claiming that he did not want to support some sort of corporate Ulster sponsorship of Bloody Sunday Inquiry after Bloody Sunday Inquiry. Neither do we. No sensible Member wants to devote that amount of wasted resources to such a process. However, that disguised the fact that he did not qualify what he ought to have qualified. He did not really establish what his motion means.

We, on this side of the House, want to know what he was really talking about when he asked for the Government and all their apparatus to fully support a commission that has not even come to interim, let alone final, conclusions. He is asking the House to handcuff itself entirely to whatever outcome might emerge from Eames and Bradley. That would be lunacy — total madness — and the Member for South Antrim would impose that madness on this House and on the Government.

Let us face the fact that he did not really address the issues raised by the Eames/Bradley group. The House deserves to have a proper debate on the subject, but, today, we have had far from a proper debate on any of the issues posed by the Eames/Bradley group. However, we got the real nub of what Mr Burnside was saying. The real motive and bitterness behind his motion was shown by his throwaway line to a Member from my party. He said:

“I will not be giving way to Paisleyites”.

We got a real sense of the man's bitterness and of official unionism at its very worst. That is what he projected in the Assembly today.

Mr Burnside asks for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to support the police. He must have forgotten what happened on 8 May 2007. Perhaps he was not here; perhaps he was away on other business. On that date, every single party to Government made an oath to support the police, the courts and the rule of law. The Ulster Unionist Party collectively failed to negotiate that for the Assembly, yet it willingly went into Government after Government with the parties that the Member now condemns.

The Member also claimed that certain Members have blood on their tongues. Yet, as Lord Morrow of Clogher Valley mentioned, David Burnside stands today not as the jailer who locks up the gangsters, but as the man who stands with the keys by his side after leaving the gates open and letting the terrorists walk over the red, bloodied carpet, welcoming them into Northern Ireland by supporting the Belfast Agreement.

The Member forgets the indisputable fact that the unionist people of Northern Ireland rejected his brand of unionism a long time ago, and they continue to reject it, because it offers them no hope whatsoever.

I ask the question, and it is important that an answer is given. Will the DUP give co-operation to the Eames/Bradley group? Of course, many of our party members have met the group; our position as a party has been put to it, and I understand that those meetings are ongoing. Until the Eames/Bradley consultative group reports, however, no one should give it a post-dated cheque. I will not dismiss the Eames/Bradley group out of hand, the way Sinn Féin would like to do, because, just as we should not endorse it until we see its report, neither should we dismiss it out of hand until we see the report's contents.

1.15 pm

There has been a one-sided debate in this Chamber today. First the Ulster Unionists attacked the Democratic Unionist Party — because that is all that they seem capable of doing nowadays — and then we had a Sinn Féin Member, Ms McCann, writing and telling her one-sided version of history. We saw a grotesque vista of what republicans believe is that one-sided version of history; indeed, we witnessed it for some moments last week in this House, when they held that grotesque celebration of the life of Mairéad Farrell. As someone who was a student at Queen's University with Mairéad Farrell, I say that that person and her colleagues got everything that they deserved on the rock of Gibraltar — make no mistake about it.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Finally, I turn to something that Alex Attwood said —

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

Mr McFarland: I am not sure what Mr Paisley Jnr is talking about, because the motion seems to have nothing to do with what he just claimed. Dealing with the past is a complex and fraught issue; we have had over 3,500 dead, over 40,000 injured and many others left with psychological damage. There can be few families in the Province who have not been affected in some way.

Of course, after the 1998 agreement, we were full of hope. However difficult it was, I still believe that we did the right thing, and 10 years later, the DUP has agreed with us, and is now sitting comfortably in Government with the former chief of staff of the Provisional IRA. Everyone is now agreed that what happened in 1998 was a good thing.

The deal in 1998 was that we would draw a line under the past, however difficult it was, and we would move on. However, the difficulty is that one grouping here, the republicans, has not moved on. Since 1998, we have got ourselves into what amounts to a one-sided truth commission, and there has been interference with the Police Ombudsman's office. That office was created to examine the actions of police officers as we move forward; however, it went straight back to examining historic cases. Various inquiries, as well as the Historical Enquiries Team, are digging around in the past to try to bring some closure to victims on what actually happened. The Historical Enquiries Team is a good organisation — I was a member of the Policing Board when it was set up and I supported it — but it has now started to exceed its remit and to interfere in the past.

If everyone were to tell the truth, perhaps some sort of system could be established to work out what went on over the past 30 years. However, the fact is that the paramilitaries will not tell the truth. Martin McGuinness has made it clear that he is not allowed to do so, because of the green book, and Mr Adams says that he was never in the IRA. I suspect that the Governments cannot, and will not, tell the truth, because they would have to start uncovering agents, which could perhaps lead to people being killed. Moreover, the civilian population was running around the place, identifying members of the security forces to republicans. Those people were subsequently murdered. Many people here have things from the past that they wish to hide. The question is, do we want to spend 50 years picking sores? That is what will happen, and this society will never settle if we spend the next 50 years doing that.

What is this move to establish a one-sided truth commission about? It is about republicans trying to persuade the world that they had no option for the past 30 years but to run around murdering people, so corrupt

and awful were the Government here. That is what it is about; it attempts to rewrite history, and that is wrong.

Concerning the collusion issue, if the security forces were so tied in with loyalists as to organise murders, why is it that, in the entire 30-year period, only 40 republicans were killed by loyalists? Either the loyalists were absolutely rubbish at killing people — which we know they were not, because they ran around the country slaughtering innocent Catholics — or there was not the level of collusion that republicans like to think that there was. The statistics do not bear out their proposal.

We need to refocus on the victims, as they are the most important part of the process. The victims' families need some form of closure. Many of them want to know what has gone on — that is absolutely fair, and HET should be able to help them with that. Victims' families should be told, and have a right to know, as much as possible. However, a point comes when it must be established whether finding out, for example, that a neighbour was the person who fingered your husband to be shot is going to lead to family feuds and trouble continuing for another 50 years. There have been cases of families feuding in west Belfast, and it something that is prevalent in the Middle East. Once family feuds start, they can be difficult to settle.

Families need closure, and the victims need support. Victims need financial support, but they also need to tell their stories — being allowed to record what happened is important for victims — and, of course, they need family support.

The Eames/Bradley consultative group is a good idea, broadly speaking. It is not yet clear what the group is going to produce, but its findings need to be handled very carefully. We pick at the past at our peril. It could go on forever and prevent our society from ever settling.

Mr Durkan: We have been treated to some excursions into the past during this debate. We have also heard conflicting versions of what the Eames/Bradley consultative group's role is, and we have heard conflicting objections to the terms of the motion and the amendment.

The motion does not tie anyone to endorsing the outcome of the Eames/Bradley exercise. It requests support for, and co-operation with, the operation of the Consultative Group on the Past. All parties have already expressed misgivings about some element of what has been reported from, or attributed to, either the Eames/Bradley group or some of the submissions made to that group. Those misgivings have been expressed again during this debate.

However, all Members must recognise that commitments and promises have been made to victims and to the wider community in relation to issues from our past and issues that affect our present and future circumstances. Those promises were not kept —

neither by the political process collectively, nor by the two Governments. Victims want to see some effort being made to address those issues. The SDLP does not consider either the proposed victims' commission or the fact that there are now four victims' commissioners designate to be perfect — we would have gone about that a different way. However, if the victims' commission exists and if it is the one means of addressing victims' issues, all parties should co-operate, engage with it and get on with things so that the most can be made of the opportunity presented by the commission.

Similarly, although we may have misgivings about who put the Eames/Bradley group together and about its remit, if that group is the one body considering this issue, we must ensure that we make the most of it, because a wider exercise in truth recovery may result from it.

Sinn Féin Members say that they do not support the Eames/Bradley group. Francie Molloy told us that that group is simply a transitional body and a talking shop, appointed by the British Government, on a remit established by the British Government. That is the same Francie Molloy who was quite prepared to be nominated and appointed Deputy Speaker of a transitional, talking-shop Assembly, by a British Government, on a remit established by the British Government, and completely controlled by the British Government.

Mr Molloy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: No, the Member will not give way, because Sinn Féin Members have not been giving way to anybody else.

Eames/Bradley may well be a transitional body. I hope that it can be a transition to something much more comprehensive for the treatment of the past. Sinn Féin has also criticised the amendment, even though it covers many of the criticisms that Sinn Féin Members have raised about the Eames/Bradley group. Sinn Féin Members say that they are concerned about there being a hierarchy of victims, and that all the players in the conflict — all the people who have truth to contribute — are not being addressed. Nevertheless, our amendment, which covers precisely those issues, has been rejected by Sinn Féin. Therefore, there is complete dishonesty in Sinn Féin's position.

There is also dishonesty in the DUP's position. The two parties are quite happy to debate and fight about the past and unite effectively in voting against the motion and the amendment. Although they are prepared to ghettoise victims on the one hand and patronise them on the other, they are not prepared to ensure that there is a serious process that delivers truth about the past, truth about particular incidents and atrocities, or truth that focuses on wider political responsibility.

Why did we stay locked for so long in the conflict and political paralysis that gave reign to the levels of violence and suffering that we experienced? The fact is that, time after time, people rejected the very institutions and arrangements that they are now embracing. It is an irony — and irony in politics is just hypocrisy with panache. Some people have turned out to be the best practisers of the very things that they preached against for years.

However, the rest of us have the right to ensure that the story of the futility and brutality suffered by people during the Troubles — when the political accommodation that we now enjoy was always available — is properly told. Sinn Féin and the DUP want to connive to ensure that that does not happen. From their different vantage points, they will snipe at Eames/Bradley and at other efforts to look at the past, and they will pretend that they will give us the best future. Between them, those two parties either excused or produced some of the worst of our past. They will never give us the best future — they will not even give us truth in this debate, never mind truth from a wider truth-recovery exercise.

Mr Campbell: We are trying to deal with the motion and the amendment, which has been accepted by the Ulster Unionist Party. Thus far, the Eames/Bradley consultative group has engaged under three headings. It has engaged in a consultation process; I and many other Members were engaged fully in that process and were content to do so. The group either had a leak, or something that was constructed to be construed as a leak. Two issues were raised as well as the consultation process. The first was the matter of the past 30 years being described as “a war”, and that brought about significant opposition and concern, which was not confined to the unionist community. The second issue was the possibility of extending an amnesty to people who took part in the killings during those 30 years.

The context in which the motion has been tabled has been set for us. There is the consultation process, in which Assembly Members and members of the public fully engaged. As I recall, that was the case in other consultation exercises. When Chris Patten embarked on his exercise to review policing in Northern Ireland, he engaged in a full consultation process, and got a similar reaction to the Eames/Bradley group. We know the outcome of the Patten consultation. Some people who expressed full support for Chris Patten, and who proposed the exercise, railed against the outcome. When that happened, Chris Patten wanted to know what those people had expected.

If we give our full support and co-operation to the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past, then, in a few months' time, or whenever the outcome is arrived at — and if that outcome is similar to what we know now — people will ask whether we were not the same ones who fully endorsed and gave our support

and co-operation to a process the outcome of which we will then be criticising. What on earth are unionists thinking about if they are willing to give full support and co-operation to the group given what we already know? That group wants to describe the past 30 years of sectarian shooting, bombing, murder and mayhem as a war.

Some people say that we should co-operate fully with the group that is —

Mr McFarland: Will the Member give way?

Mr Campbell: No, I will not give way.

Those people want us to co-operate fully and support a group that is leaking that sort of information: the same group that is saying that an amnesty should be considered for all those who were engaged in such activities in the past.

1.30 pm

The DUP knows that now. The Ulster Unionists knew that when they tabled the motion, but they went ahead anyway, and yet they wonder why some parties will not support the motion. The Assembly must deal with the past, and I take on board the honourable Member for Foyle Mr Durkan's point to that effect.

However, the past must be dealt with in a manner that does not encapsulate everyone who died under one heading. Sinn Féin wants to do exactly that; it wants the people who set out to murder in Loughgall to be treated in the same way as those whom they killed before arriving in the village. That cannot be done. There are murderers and there are the murdered, and there is no equivalence between them. Anyone who agrees to a process that arrives at such an equivalence does the work of those who want to ensure that a veil is put over the past and that the past is described in terms that ensure that everyone is treated the same. Unfortunately, whether deliberately or through accidentally wording the motion —

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Campbell: No, because I am about to finish.

Unfortunately, the motion's wording enables certain people to get away under a smokescreen, by saying that they were as much victims as anyone else.

The DUP cannot fully support a process that will try to equate the murderers with the murdered. Let us deal with the past appropriately, so that innocent victims will genuinely be able to say that they have had their day in court and that their cases have been heard and dealt with. Their loved ones and those who murdered them must not receive the same treatment.

Mr Armstrong: The refusal of the IRA to meet the Eames/Bradley consultative group came as little surprise to many of Northern Ireland's unionist family. I have long wondered at the inconsistency of the

republican position on dealing with the past. When republicans are faced with many awkward questions, their answer is that everyone should move on.

However, moving on is the last thing on Sinn Féin's mind when it comes to the hugely expensive Bloody Sunday Inquiry. Sinn Féin is more than happy to call for similar inquiries into any injustice, whether real or imaginary, that they consider can be laid at the door of the British state.

Republicans have long supported the fanciful notion of a truth commission based on the South African model. They conveniently ignore the fact that the deputy First Minister rendered such a body powerless by his statement to the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, in which he said that he would not break his oath of silence to the IRA. If a key member of the IRA is unable to tell the truth about his involvement, equality demands that the same protection be afforded to others, from whatever side, who might be expected to appear before a truth commission.

Even if the IRA were to co-operate with a truth commission, how could anyone trust the word of an organisation that has repeatedly lied about its activities? To name but a few examples, the IRA lied about its involvement with the disappeared; it denied the murder of Detective Garda Jerry McCabe; and it denied the Northern Bank robbery. The IRA's lack of engagement with the Eames/Bradley group is a lesson to everyone who wishes to spend millions of pounds on a truth commission. In the absence of the main dealers in mayhem and murder, such a body would end up pursuing show trials of members of the security forces, who daily risked life and limb in a bid to thwart the terrorists. Truth would be the IRA's first victim.

Mrs Long: I do not wish to reiterate everything that Dr Farry said about the Alliance Party's position on dealing with the past and its legacy. However, it must be recognised that that is probably the most important and sensitive challenge that faces our society. The issue goes beyond the victims and those directly affected by violence, although they comprise an important group.

Those who have been affected indirectly by violence, as well as future generations, who live under the shadow of the past, must be considered. We must deal with, for example, the context of the conflict, the impact that it has had over the past 40 years, and the ongoing effect that it has on society both now and in the future. Let us be clear: there is no agreement, either in the House or in wider society, about those issues. I have no doubt that some Members may argue that the clock must not yet start ticking on those 40 years. If so, that point that must be discussed further.

The consultative group's purpose is not to get consensus on those or other issues; it is simply to identify the breadth and range of issues that must be

discussed and the mechanisms that could be used to deal properly and satisfactorily with areas of conflict. Therefore, the SDLP's amendment causes no conflict, given that the groups that it lists should be involved in scoping that exercise in order that those mechanisms can deal with all the issues properly.

It is sad and slightly depressing that, rather than adopting a mature and measured approach to dealing with issues, Members have allowed the tone of the debate to become one of finger pointing and accusation, mainly with a view to scoring political points and undermining opponents. On different occasions, all Members have contributed positively and negatively to the conflict. All of us should, therefore, hold up our hands and try to do something about it. Members can argue about the degree to which we carry blame, but we should, at least, be mature enough to face realities.

Reconciliation in the context of a divided society will be a painful process. Elements of the consultative group's final recommendations will be painful — or even unacceptable — to Members. I have two comments to make about that. First, it is still right for the Assembly to co-operate fully and support the group's operations in order that it can be afforded the best chance to devise a solution. Secondly, rather than examine any of the group's recommendations one at a time, it is important that the Assembly considers them as part of a package.

When they discussed those matters in the Preparation for Government Committee and the Programme for Government Committee, Members recognised that a more holistic, rather than piecemeal, approach is needed. Such a piecemeal approach has, frankly, done more harm than good to societal relations. The tit-for-tat approach that is taken to public inquiries is just one example of that. It has caused serious frustration because, first, it creates the impression that high-profile victims or cases are more worthy of attention and investigation than others. That in turn compounds the hurt that is felt by people who have lost loved ones. Secondly, by its very nature, it tends to focus on state and security force actions. Such a view can create imbalance, given that paramilitaries are not subjected to the same scrutiny as those organisations. Therefore, the Assembly must proceed in a manner that ensures that all those issues are dealt with.

Alan McFarland gave voice to the valid concern that we may simply end up picking over the past and reopening old wounds. However, history shows clearly that those wounds are festering, rather than healing. If problems are not dealt with, they will resurface, not in the managed context of a process, but simply one at a time, thus destabilising further the political progress that has been made. The Balkans, for example, teach a salutary lesson to those who believe that a line can

simply be drawn under the past and that history does not need to be dealt with.

Finally, my party does not want to rewrite history, nor will it accept a selective edit of it. Issues of the past must be examined holistically and in the round. If the cycle of violence that has blighted this island for a long time is dealt with properly, it can potentially be broken. Although we do not want to rewrite history, perhaps we can move forward and start to write the new and better future that people elected us to deliver.

Ms Purvis: I support the motion and the amendment. The amendment renders the motion more inclusive. The situation in question applies to all sections of society, including victims and survivors.

Dealing with the past is difficult. However, that does not mean that it should be ignored. It is crucial to the stabilising of the future for several reasons. The increasing cost of inquiries and retrospective investigations, which some Members have already mentioned, is cause for concern. Although a person's right to seek justice or truth, as he or she sees it, must not be undermined, the question must be asked as to whether, in the context of ever-decreasing resources, those matters could be dealt with another way.

The constant revisionism from both sides of the House, which is reflected in the rest of society, is another reason. Perhaps one official narrative on the past 40 years is a possibility. With collective responsibility, we can zoom in on the truth and cut off the propaganda that sits so far from it.

Whatever the solution may be, we, as a society, need to deal with our past in a comprehensive and collective way. The Consultative Group on the Past may offer a set of proposals, and it is incumbent on all Members to give those serious consideration and engage in a rational debate in order to come to a collective decision on how we, as a society, deal with our past.

Healing Through Remembering is an organisation — of which I am a member — that has conducted a lot of work on this issue. Its work is not a secret, and I commend it to this House as the first serious and comprehensive examination of how we can get to grips with our past.

Our past is continually encroaching on our ability to move forward and to build a better and shared future. The debate about the Maze site is one example of that. Other debates in the Chamber are also examples of how different interpretations of what happened and how blame is apportioned cause not only instability in this Government, but in the communities that were most affected by the conflict. The language and actions in the House have a knock-on effect outside this Chamber.

On one side of the House, there are those who argue that the Troubles were a security problem, that discrim-

ination did not exist and that all that was needed, therefore, was more Army and police to deal with the problem. We are living proof that the so-called security problem required a political solution based on equality, human rights and accountable policing.

On the other side of the House, there are those who believe that the conflict was ideologically driven and that it was a war against the Brits to end years of colonial rule. In other words, they believe that the British presence in Ireland was the cause of the conflict. That conflict has ended and the causes have been addressed; not by the Brits leaving, but by human rights, equality, a campaign for an Irish language Act and bobbies on the beat. Playing to the gallery may improve their standing in their constituencies, but is it helping to build the type of society that they want to live in?

There is no question that people on all sides committed acts of violence. However, we all need to take responsibility for our actions or inactions during the conflict, and everyone should ask themselves the question: what would I have done differently? Mrs Long talked about that during her speech. Every citizen, organisation and institution — from those who committed acts of violence to those who are no less culpable in the creation of a divided society that dehumanised the other community to the point of abject hatred — needs to ask itself that question.

Which Churches rightly condemned murder, bombings and shootings from their pulpits, but continued to preach that theirs was the one true Church and that others were wrong? What woman or man rejoiced when an IRA man blew himself up, or cheered when a UVF man was shot dead? Who listened to the police messages on the radio waiting to find out if the latest bomb killed “theirs” or “ours”? Who vetted their children’s friends to ensure that the other sort was not among them? Who propagated the notion that a Prod could be spotted because their eyes were close together, or that Taigs had horns or tattoos on their heads? These are questions that people should ask themselves. Did they teach their class by the book? Did they report a news story objectively? Did they nurse a patient attentively? Did they provide a house on the basis of need? Did they welcome people to their homes — and I am sorry that certain Members have left the Chamber — when those people were not democrats, and then condemn them as traitors and an abomination when they became democrats?

Some acknowledgement is needed by all who have lived through the past four decades. It is vital to the debate that we all engage honestly and fully in order to build a shared and better future.

Mrs D Kelly: It is a widely held belief that the Troubles in Northern Ireland began in 1969. Although there is little doubt that the years that followed 1969

saw some of the most appalling examples of man’s inhumanity to man, there is an increased acknowledgment — as Mr Burnside pointed out — that the Troubles started in 1966. The first recorded deaths came during that year when two Catholic men and an elderly Protestant woman were killed by the UVF. Many people now believe that those acts marked the start of the Troubles.

Heightened political and sectarian tension created the backdrop for those murders, and there are people in this House who must ask themselves what role they played in creating that environment.

1.45 pm

Over the years of the Troubles — from 1966 to 2003 — 3,697 people were brutally murdered, and thousands more suffered physical injuries and mental trauma. According to ‘Lost Lives’ — the only existing memorial to all those who died — extremist republican paramilitary organisations were responsible for 58·3% of those deaths; loyalists for 29·7%; and the security forces for 9·9%. The greatest single taker of life was the Provisional IRA, which accounted for almost half the deaths. It is worth noting that, of the civilian dead, the majority were Catholic. It is shameful that Sinn Féin Members have attempted to rewrite history today, rather than acknowledge the part that their paramilitary wing played in those deaths.

As Members from the UUP and the Alliance Party recognised, victims’ and survivors’ groups have made simple requests for truth and justice, in order to deal with the legacy of the past. Many do not believe that anyone will be brought before the courts for the murders of their loved ones — but they want to know the truth about what happened.

The amendment clearly cites those organisations that have the power to bring closure to the quests for truth of the families of victims. No discussion about the past is complete without recognising the inhumane suffering that has been inflicted on the families of the disappeared — as Mr Armstrong quite rightly said. They continue to be denied a Christian burial for their loved ones. I reiterate the SDLP’s call to the IRA to return the bodies for a Christian burial.

I take offence at the remark that Mr Burnside made about defining the victims — as they see themselves — of Bloody Sunday. That was uncalled for. He is quite right to point out that the year dot did not begin on May 8 2007. The opportunities for building a better future — and for ending conflict and violence — existed over the past 30 years, but were denied to the people of Northern Ireland by the actions of both the DUP and Sinn Féin, who pulled down all those who attempted to lead us into a better future.

Dr Farry and Mrs Long spoke of how issues of more critical importance should be discussed in this House.

Not only have the DUP and Sinn Féin said that they will not support the findings of the Eames/Bradley group — just as they will not support the cost of division report — but they want to bury the strategic-futures audit that was commissioned and completed in 2007. One of the commitments in the St Andrews legislation was to tackle poverty; but the DUP and Sinn Féin have no strategy for dealing with that, and wish to bin once-in-a-lifetime opportunities.

The all-party panel work on the Maze/Long Kesh site has also been forgotten about, as the DUP and Sinn Féin attempt to revise their pasts. In its attempt to rewrite the past and rubbish all things that came under direct rule, Sinn Féin failed to mention its support for the Northern Ireland (Offences) Bill. Conor Murphy rushed to Westminster to welcome that legislation, which would not only have given an amnesty to all, but would have set out to cover up the truth about what happened.

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

Mr McNarry: The big question is whether the political wing of the Provisional republican movement — which is represented in the Executive — will support and fully co-operate with the Eames/Bradley group, or whether it will choose to repudiate the Assembly by following the lead of the Provos in refusing to meet or co-operate with the Consultative Group on the Past — therefore confirming that, although it holds office in Government, its participation and policies are controlled by the grace and favour of the Provo high command.

Of all the people with a past, the House and the public deserve to know where those Ministers stand on that issue. If the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past is to be credible, its terms of reference must be addressed fully. Its remit includes making recommendations on any steps that might be taken to support Northern Ireland in building a shared future that is not overshadowed by the past. That is a mighty — almost impossible — task when one considers the events of the present and how they are linked to the Provisional movement, which believes that its role in the past is nothing of which to be ashamed.

Take the eulogising of a dead Provo terrorist and the marking of an office shrine to her in the Building last week. Take the temerity and the bravado of the deputy First Minister in the same week as 'Rambo' hit the cinemas. The deputy First Minister regaled us with fact, not fiction, when he said that, had he had the opportunity, one particular Sunday in Londonderry, he would have killed any British soldier. Did he have the opportunity? Well, did he? This is the same man who thinks nothing of his violent past and who dismisses awkward questions with a "let's move on" quip. However, in reality, he is unable to give up on his past. Those two illustrations — and, unfortunately and

regrettably, there will be more to come — are accurate pointers that the Provos are incapable of moving on for fear that they will destroy the myths, legends and lies that they have created.

Nothing that the Assembly can do can change the past, but, ultimately, everything that we do changes the future. That is good enough reason for us to be here, striving to make devolved democracy work. However, the Eames/Bradley group has its work cut out. How can it conclude that events of the past will not overshadow the future, when hardly a day passes by that does not bring in the present and expose republican thinking and its false denials? Take the following quote:

"The British State are protagonists in this conflict".

Note the use of the present tense in that statement. It was made not five, 10, 20 or 30 years ago — that quote was lifted from Sinn Féin's website only last October, and it was made by Francie Molloy after his meeting with the Eames/Bradley group. That is the very same Francie Molloy MLA who sits in this British devolved Assembly, who accepts Her Majesty's pay cheque and allowances, and who is even entitled to extra pay for his role as an honourable Deputy Speaker. What is he telling us? Is it that the British — which is code for all unionists — remain protagonists and that, moreover, in his view, the conflict is not over? Who, therefore, can fault unionists for disbelieving when we are unable to differentiate between the republican-speak of the past and that of the present? Who can blame unionists for having serious reservations about including republicans in our future? Do they — both wings of the Provisional movement — really expect unionists to entertain a future built around a mandatory coalition Executive that embrace one party that is sustaining a culture that justifies terrorism and seeks inclusivity to hero-worship those who forfeited their lives when on a mission to kill or maim innocent people? Do they really expect unionists even to work with those who are now intent on demolishing the historic symbols built in and around Parliament Buildings? Let me answer that: if they harbour such expectations, they will fail.

I have not yet heard a logical case, reason or argument that casts doubt in my mind that there is not a significant difference between those who upheld the law of this country and those who, in my lifetime, procured arms, identified targets, erected signs depicting a "sniper at work", lay in ditches ready to ambush, hid behind women's skirts, robbed banks, peddled drugs, ran fuel rackets, smuggled, showed no respect for human life, made and detonated bombs, and kidnapped, tortured and executed men, women and children. The comparisons prove that there is a massive difference between those who wore a proper uniform and served to uphold the law of this country, and terrorists — I side with those who upheld the law.

However, here I am, along with fellow unionists and other MLAs, playing a pivotal role in striving to make this devolved legislature respected, worthwhile, meaningful, long-lasting and — moreover — legitimate. We are desperate to deliver a viable, stable and economically successful Northern Ireland. Against high odds, and in spite of my own intolerances, I am willing to give the Assembly a chance.

I ask all Members to endorse the motion for its content and, in doing so, help encourage the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to lead by example and demonstrate to others that unless the truth is told about the past, the story is not worth telling. The motion refers to two men who both have pasts about which the Eames/Bradley group would want to hear. However, who will judge the pasts of others? Who is capable of recognising the truth? There is no case being made from this side of the House for a truth commission — that is not what the motion is about. If people suspect that a truth commission would be told a pack of lies, no one would believe anything that it had to say.

The motion identifies how two men who hold high office can help the Eames/Bradley group. It has nothing to do with what the Eames/Bradley group may report on — that is a debate for another day. The motion is about how the First Minister and the deputy First Minister can help the group operate and contribute to its work.

One party in the Chamber can vote against the motion and, in doing so, vote with republicans as a collective against the victims — that choice is theirs.

Mr Campbell: It is an amnesty.

Mr McNarry: It is nothing to do with an amnesty. It is your choice. What you decide will be on record — people will look at the vote, not the rhetoric. Not the amnesty, Mr Campbell —

Mr Campbell: Yes, yes, yes.

Mr McNarry: You are wrong. You have dug yourself into a hole, and you cannot get out of it. I commend —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask Members to make their remarks through the Chair.

Mr McNarry: I apologise for not directing my remarks through the Chair.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is OK.

Mr McNarry: I commend the motion — it is worthy of the support of the House, and I hope that Members act accordingly.

2.00 pm

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 37; Noes 52.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Burnside, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr McNarry, Mr Neeson, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Ms Ritchie, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr P J Bradley and Mr Burns.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Lord Browne, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr Spratt.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give their full support and co-operation to the operations of the Eames/Bradley Consultative group on the Past.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There being no further items on the Order Paper other than Question Time and the Adjournment debate, I seek, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until Question Time, which begins at 2.30 pm. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 2.15 pm.

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

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Modern Accommodation in Schools

1. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Education to detail the progress made to ensure that primary and post-primary schools in the East Derry/Londonderry constituency have modern and appropriately designed educational accommodation. (AQO 2392/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá obair thógála ar siúl faoi láthair ar dhá scoil nua a athsholáthar.

Building work is under way on two new replacement schools: a new school for Carnalridge Primary School, Portrush, will cater for 260 pupils at a cost of £1.65 million; and the new school to facilitate the amalgamation of Burnfoot, Dungiven and Largy primary schools will cater for 115 pupils at a cost of £0.93 million. Construction work on those projects is due to finish in June and August 2008, respectively.

Planning is also under way for a new replacement school building for Ballykelly Primary School, which will cater for 410 pupils at an estimated cost of £3.1 million, and it is anticipated that construction work on that new school will start in late 2008 or early 2009.

The Department of Education (DE) will, therefore, be spending approximately £5.68 million on new school buildings in the Member's constituency. A proposed major capital scheme for Dominican College in Portstewart is also at economic appraisal stage, and a feasibility study is being undertaken to examine the future requirements of Coleraine Academical Institution and Coleraine High School. A capital scheme for Coleraine College is on hold due to uncertainties on the provision that will be required in the area for the longer term.

Mr Campbell: The Minister will be aware of the state of many schools that she has not mentioned. Some of them are over 50 years old, and many of them are in a dilapidated condition. Remedial work is carried out almost annually on some of them, such is the extent of the decline of the buildings. Despite that, the pupils and the staff do their best. When will the Minister bring

forward a programme of work to systematically replace those out-of-date buildings?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. The Department is considering minor works applications from St Mary's High School, Limavady — Scoil Naomh Muire, Léim an Mhadaidh; Roe Valley Integrated Primary School; St Matthew's Primary School, Limavady — Scoil Naomh Maitiú, Léim an Mhadaidh; St John's Primary School, Dernaflaw — Naomh Póil, Doire na Fleá; Coleraine Academical Institution; Dominican College, Portstewart — An Coláiste Doiminiceach, Port Stiobhaird, nó Port na Binne Uaine; St Patrick's and St Joseph's Primary School, Garvagh; and St Paul's College, Kilrea.

The project for Dominican College and the potential projects for Coleraine Academical Institution and Coleraine High School are at an early stage, and we are looking at when the minor works programme will be brought forward. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Dallat: Recently, the Minister said that capital schemes would be guided by area-based planning and a sustainable schools policy. Does that include current schemes? If so, when will those schools know whether their schemes will go ahead?

Ms Ruane: In considering the need for capital expenditure at any school, the Department of Education takes full account of all existing provision in the area. My Department has a duty to consider all published development proposals. As Members will know, proposals come from different organisations, and I consider each one on its merits. Members will be glad to know that the chairpersons of the area-based planning central group and the five local area groups are meeting after Question Time.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In East Derry, which schools' minor works applications are the Department considering?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. Is iad na scoileanna a mbeimid ag déanamh oibre orthu: St Mary's High School, Limavady; Roe Valley Integrated Primary School; St Matthew's Primary School, Limavady; St John's Primary School, Dernaflaw; Coleraine Academical Institution; Dominican College, Portstewart; St Patrick's and St Joseph's Primary School, Garvagh; and Coláiste Naomh Póil, Cill Riabhach — St Paul's College in Kilrea.

Education Committee: Policy Proposals

2. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister of Education to outline any policy proposals that she has received from the Committee for Education since May 2007.

(AQO 2516/08)

5. **Mrs O'Neill** asked the Minister of Education to detail the proposals that she has received from the

Committee for Education in relation to post-primary transfer. (AQO 2515/08)

Ms Ruane: Ó athbhunaíodh an cineachadh ar 8 Bealtaine 2007, ní bhfuair mé oiread is togra polasaí amháin ón Choiste Oideachais.

Since restoration of devolution on 8 May 2007, I have not received a single policy proposal from the Committee for Education. Other Committees have conducted inquiries, produced proposals and published reports. The Public Accounts Committee, for example, has published eight reports and another three are in the pipeline. To date, the Education Committee has not submitted any reports or policy proposals, but I look forward to receiving answers to the questions that I put to it. I have asked it to present me with consensus proposals. I will treat seriously any proposals that it produces.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, is that also the answer to question 5? Are you answering those two questions together?

Ms Ruane: Yes, it is. I am sorry — I did not explain that I wished to answer questions 2 and 5 together.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. During an earlier exchange, a member of the Education Committee described its role as “marking the Minister’s homework”. Is the Minister satisfied that she has provided sufficient policy detail to allow the Committee to exercise that function if it wishes?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. Tá brón orm as sin.

Policy scrutiny, as everyone knows, is a key role of the Committee, but it is not the Committee’s only responsibility. The Committee exists, in the first instance, to provide advice to the Minister and to assist with policy development.

I have provided extensive information to the Committee. I have met with it on no fewer than seven occasions. Week after week, officials from the Department of Education’s top management team appear before the Committee to answer questions on papers that the Department has spent hours preparing at the request of the Committee.

The Assembly has been functioning for almost a year now. In that time, my Department has spent thousands of personnel hours servicing the Education Committee by producing papers, preparing responses, giving evidence, answering questions and providing clarification to facilitate yet another set of questions.

To date, that has been entirely a one-way process, which has cost the taxpayer thousands of pounds. It is now March, and the Education Committee has yet to produce a single scrap of paper. The time is fast

approaching when it may prove necessary to decline such interminable and evidently unproductive requests.

I had a very good meeting with the Committee last Tuesday, the Committee had a good meeting on Friday, and I hope that we will have a new era in relations between an tAire Oideachais agus an Coiste Oideachais.

Mrs O’Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In order to further assist the Committee in its role, will the Minister confirm on how many occasions she has attended meetings of the Committee and whether she is willing to attend, as appropriate, in the future?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I have met with Education Committee on four formal and three informal occasions. Four meetings related explicitly to post-primary transfer and/or the future of post-primary education, as outlined in my statement of 4 December 2007.

In case there should be any ambiguity — I do not like ambiguity, I like to deal in detail — the dates are as follows: on 18 May 2007, I attended a meeting that related to the role, structure and functions of the Department of Education; on 25 May 2007, I attended a meeting on the review of public administration and post-primary transfer; on 20 November 2007, I attended a meeting, in closed session, to discuss the draft Budget, Programme for Government and investment strategy; and on 31 January 2008, I attended a meeting to discuss post-primary transfer. Informal briefings were also given on 5 November 2007, on classroom assistants; 4 December 2007, on post-primary transfer and the future of post-primary education; and 4 March 2008, on area-based planning. *[Interruption.]*

I must raise my voice because I am being interrupted.

I also met the Chairperson — Cathaoirleach — of the Committee on a number of occasions; I met the education spokesperson of each party; and, at the appropriate time, I will be happy to meet the Committee about relevant issues.

Ms Lo: The Minister says that the role of the Committee is to advise her on policy development. Is it the job of the Committee to put forward to her individual policy proposals? The role of the Committee is to scrutinise and to help.

A Member: When will the Minister answer the question?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The question has been asked; therefore, Members should be orderly when listening to the Minister.

Ms Ruane: One of the Committee’s roles is policy scrutiny; however, another is to advise and assist, and I have yet to see any evidence of that. That said, I hope that we are entering a new era, and I look forward to working with all the members of the Committee. There

is enormous change in the education system, and it behoves us all to work well together. I look forward to continuing to work with the Committee, the parties' education spokespersons and other Ministers in the Executive. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr K Robinson: Ich danke Ihnen, Herr Delegierter Präsident. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Given the fundamental nature of the Minister's proposed restructuring of the education system and the Education Committee's relatively limited resources, does she think it fair to burden the Committee with resolving issues for which she is responsible?

Ms Ruane: Muchas gracias por la pregunta. I thank the Member for the question.

I consider the Committee to have an advisory and assisting role, and, as I said, it is important that we all work together to bring about the required changes. I also welcome the Member's speaking in another language, although I am not sure which one it was. Nevertheless, it is good to support different languages.

Cuirim fáilte roimhe sin, nó tá sé an-tábhachtach ar fad. It is important to speak different languages in the House.

Academic Selection: Legal Status

3. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Education to outline the legal status of academic selection in existing legislation. (AQO 2500/08)

Ms Ruane: Thug an tOrdú Oideachais 1997 agus a rialacháin tacaíochta creatlach reachtúil don chóras reatha de roghú acadúil i scoileanna gramadaí.

The legislative framework for the present system of academic selection in grammar schools is in the Education Order 1997 and its supporting regulations. By virtue of the Education Order 2006, that legislative framework will lapse with effect from transfer 2010.

Article 28(1) of the Education Order 2006 gives the Department the power to specify, through regulations, the admissions criteria that schools may use. Article 28(2) of the Education Order 2006 precludes the Department from including academic admissions criteria in any future permitted admissions. Article 28(2) has not been commenced.

That legislative position makes the introduction of new admissions criteria regulations contingent on a resolution of the future of academic selection. Without such a resolution and regulations, there would be an absence of law and an unregulated system.

A lapse into unregulation would not safeguard academic selection, as independent and unregulated academic selection is a prospect fraught with administrative and legal perils. That is why I have always been

clear about the need for consensus, and I intend to introduce proposals that reflect the legislative position and the wider need for reform in post-primary education. On 4 March 2008, my statement on area-based planning was a key element of that wider process.

Mr Moutray: Given that academic selection is protected in legislation, will the Minister confirm that her final proposals will reflect that fact?

Ms Ruane: I do not accept that; it is not what I said, and it is not the position. The legislation makes the commencement of the abolition of academic admissions criteria subject to an Assembly vote, and it makes the introduction of new admissions criteria regulations contingent on a resolution of the future of academic selection. Without such a resolution and regulations, there would be an absence of law and an unregulated system. A lapse into unregulation would not safeguard academic selection, as independent and unregulated academic selection is a prospect fraught with administrative and legal perils. I repeat: that is why I have always been clear about the need for consensus, and I intend to introduce proposals that reflect that position.

Mr Gallagher: Given that we have had academic selection for 60 years and that there is wide agreement about the damage that labelling and stigmatising so many of our children as failures has caused, will the Minister assure Members that new arrangements will not include any form of academic selection?

2.45 pm

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. I agree that academic selection and the transfer test have not been good for our children. As I have said in the House on many occasions, testing children at the tender age of 10 or 11 and marking them on the results of two one-hour tests is not the way forward. There is broad consensus on that and on the fact that 14 is a more appropriate age for a child to transfer. I have also said that I will introduce proposals and that my aim is to end academic selection in the North of Ireland.

Mr B McCrea: Bearing in mind that there has not yet been a debate on academic selection and that there remains a possibility that it will be retained, would it not be advisable for the Minister to instruct the Council for the Curriculum, Examination and Assessment (CCEA) to investigate possible alternatives to the 11-plus, even if only on a contingency basis? There is still time to find a proper solution that would meet the needs of those who are in favour of academic selection. However, it is imperative that we start now.

Although I accept the Minister's position on, among other matters, article 28(2) of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, and given that we do not want to end up in a regulatory minefield, all that I am proposing is a contingency position. Will the Minister assure the House that she will instruct Council for the Curriculum,

Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to start some preparatory work?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. I have made it clear that the 11-plus will take place for the last time this year. I am glad that the exam is going, because as I said earlier, there is broad consensus that it is not the way forward. Many other countries throughout the world that have education systems that do not have the tail of underachievement that we have do not have academic selection at all. Indeed, they are particularly shocked to find that we have selection at 10 or 11 years of age.

I will not instruct CCEA to organise another test; that is not the right way to proceed. We have had the 11-plus for far too long, and far too many young people have been told that they are failures. We must introduce new proposals, which is what I aim to do. We have time to do that, so we must be careful not to create the myth that there is not enough time.

Area-Based Planning: Consultation

4. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Education to outline the consultation that she will undertake with parents in relation to the new area-based planning process. (AQO 2403/08)

Ms Ruane: Aithním an riachtanas lena chinntiú go gcluintear guth na dtuismitheoirí in aon phróiseas pleanála bunaithe sa cheantar.

I recognise the need to ensure that parental voices are heard in any area-based planning process. Full-blown area-based planning will be an important responsibility of the new education and skills authority, which will draw up plans on how best to meet local educational need. In developing the role of the new authority as part of the review of public administration, there will be consultation with stakeholders on proposals for area-based planning. Parental views will, of course, be accommodated in the consultation process.

In my statement on March 4 on the area-based planning process for the post-primary sector, I explained that central and area groups are being set up in local areas to develop plans for post-primary provision. There will be consultation on those plans, and contributions from parents will be an important part of that process. In developing my proposals for this area, I have deliberately sought views from boards, the maintained, integrated and Irish-medium sectors, and parents and communities.

The delivery of the entitlement framework will require the implementation of the area planning of provision. That offers the prospect of greater flexibility and a greater ability for provision in any area to be responsive to parental demand. I am determined to get

a view of the way forward from a sectoral, community and parental viewpoint.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she encourage community audits and deliberative polling techniques in the course of the consultations in order to obtain valid parental opinion?

Ms Ruane: As I said earlier, after Question Time, I will meet with the six chairpersons and the joint chairperson of the local and central area-based planning groups. I do not want to pre-empt the work of those groups, because it is their job to move things forward, but I will tell them that we need the maximum possible consultation with local communities. If people have ideas, we will consider them.

Mr Durkan: I have withdrawn my supplementary question.

Mr Kennedy: Is the Minister aware of the recent joint statement issued by the leaders of the main Protestant Churches — the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church and the President of the Methodist Church — expressing their concern at the exclusion of transferor representatives from their rightful places on the new area-based planning groups? Will she take some friendly advice? Will she stop needlessly alienating the Protestant and unionist communities on this and other education issues?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Ruane: As the Member will know, I am aware of the joint statement. To avoid any lack of detail, I spoke to one senior transferor representative last Tuesday and to another on Friday. I assured the chairperson of the Transferor Representatives' Council that I had taken their comments on board and had listened carefully to what they said. I assured him that my area-based planning proposals and committee make-up were built on inclusion rather than exclusion.

The person whom I spoke to on Friday said that the council was reassured, and thanked me for that. I then heard 'Sunday Sequence' and contacted the programme to inform the presenter that transferor representatives are being included in the central group. *[Interruption.]* Excuse me, I did not interrupt you, Danny — I did not interrupt the Member.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister has the Floor. The longer we remain on this stairway, the less opportunity there will be to ask questions. When Members ask questions, please allow the Minister to answer them.

Mr McNarry: Tell her to answer the question.

Ms Ruane: If Members would not keep interrupting me, I would be able to answer the question.

I was very clear on ‘Sunday Sequence’ yesterday about the membership of the central group and the five local groups. I do not know how much clearer I can be.

I want the process to be built on inclusion, and I want to ensure that all the stakeholders are represented. I want to ensure that this is a good process in which we are doing something unique — building a new education system throughout the North. It is vital that all the educationalists are part of that. I look forward to working with the Christian Churches, and I look forward to working with representatives from other faiths.

Miss McIlveen: The Minister said that transferor representatives will no longer be guaranteed places on boards of governors, as of right, under the new review of public administration proposals. She has deliberately excluded transferor representatives from places on groups that will plan the future of all our schools throughout Northern Ireland, and she is only making a token gesture of permitting one transferor representative to be appointed as a chairperson.

Since this Minister continually proclaims her adherence to equality, what equality impact assessment has she carried out in setting up the area-based planning groups? She has seen fit to have a representative from the Irish Republic on those groups, and not someone who has given dedicated service throughout the years; therefore, how will she address that issue?

Ms Ruane: I have to repeat myself again, because the Member may have not been listening. The transferor representatives are on the central group and they are on the five local groups — there is no exclusion. People should not make an issue out of something that is not an issue. Go raibh maith agat.

St Patrick’s and St Joseph’s Primary Schools, Ahoghill: Amalgamation

6. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Education to outline the current position of the review of her decision to amalgamate St Patrick’s and St Joseph’s Primary Schools in Ahoghill. (AQO 2502/08)

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. At the beginning of the previous school term, pupil numbers at St Patrick’s Primary School dropped significantly, as some parents chose to educate their children elsewhere. The approval of the amalgamation of St Patrick’s and St Joseph’s primary schools in Ahoghill was given at the time on the basis that there should be further consideration by the trustees on the educational needs of the children in the area.

Following the decline in numbers at St Patrick’s Primary School, the Department raised with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) the issue of

whether it was appropriate to proceed with an amalgamation, rather than simply to pursue a closure proposal.

Concerns have been expressed about the deficits at the two schools and the fact that they must be met by the North Eastern Education and Library Board when amalgamation occurs. In any case, such costs would be met if closures, rather than amalgamation, were pursued. In addition, a closure proposal for St Patrick’s Primary School would have to be the subject of a new consultation exercise. The important issue is that it must be the best way in which to meet the educational needs of the children.

Mr Storey: So that she is under no illusions, I can say to the Minister that, as a member of the Committee for Education, I have no intention of doing her homework for her as well as marking it. I am referring to previous comments that she has made.

With regard to the amalgamation of those two schools in my constituency, will the Minister publish the outcome of the review? This is another example of her mishandling a situation in my constituency, and she has paid absolutely no regard to the needs of parents and pupils. She is well aware that, in the case of one of the schools, parents have decided to send their children to a school in Portglenone. It is quite clear that the Minister made her decision without any consultation with parents and pupils.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member ask a question, please?

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give financial assistance to the North Eastern Education and Library Board, which now has a deficit of more than £500,000 as a result of the Minister’s bad decision on the matter in Ahoghill?

Ms Ruane: With all due respect, the Member is the last person whom I would ask to do my homework for me, because I would be worried about the mark that I might get. I would rather do my own homework, thank you — *[Interruption.]* — I did not interrupt the Member.

The board has received its budget, and it has made no representation to me on that matter. I ask the Member to stop playing politics. Amalgamations are difficult enough, and parents will make choices that are not always possible to anticipate. We must build a society and schools in which children feel safe no matter where they may be.

Mr O’Loan: Will the Minister confirm her support for all educational sectors, in line with parental preference? Does she agree that the best course of action would be for everyone, including elected representatives, to give their full support to the new school in Ahoghill – St Paul’s – so that parents will have confidence in it for the future?

Ms Ruane: First, it is important that we have diversity in our education system and that parents can

chose the type of sector that they want — be it Irish medium, integrated, controlled or Catholic maintained. That is important, and I agree with the Member. It must be said that, because of certain issues in society, communities have not felt safe. We must deal with those issues collectively, and we must deal with sectarianism in our society.

Secondly, I am liaising with CCMS on the new school, and I do not want to pre-empt its consultations. However, I will come back to Members on that issue.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline how the new school can be considered viable in the light of the recommendations in the Bain Report?

Ms Ruane: Viability, particularly in rural areas, is not simply a question of enrolments. A complex range of factors must be considered for sustainable schools, including the quality of the educational experience; the financial position; leadership and management; accessibility, which is a particular issue in rural areas; and links with the community.

At the time of the decision about amalgamation, it was explained to CCMS that further consideration needed to be given to the educational needs of the children in the area for the longer term.

3.00 pm

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Management Month

1. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how his Department participated in the recent management month. (AQO 2420/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): Management month is an awareness-raising initiative that is co-ordinated by the Management and Leadership Network on behalf of my Department. With the exception of some commercial sponsorship, my Department provides most of the funding for the planning, promotion and delivery of management month.

Officials attended eight of the 11 publicity events, including all of the local roadshows, to advise on the Department's support programmes. I addressed the management and leadership conference at the end of February, and my permanent secretary presented management awards at that event.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Minister for his reply. What measures are being taken that are particularly directed at improving the management and leadership performance of small and medium-sized firms?

Sir Reg Empey: The area that is at most need is the small and medium-sized enterprise sector, which constitutes the bulk of Northern Ireland businesses. My Department currently provides £260,000 of annual funding for the Management and Leadership Network. The funding arrangements between my Department and that network have expired and require review, and an independent review on the value for money of that funding is outstanding. The existing funding arrangements will continue, pending the outcome of that review, and we will attempt to establish during that very short process whether we are establishing management and leadership skills in the small and medium-sized sector. We will be asking whether that funding is adequate, whether it is working, whether we are getting value for money, and, more importantly, whether we are succeeding.

Additional new support programmes that are focused on improving management capabilities in small and medium-sized enterprises are at the core of the issue. The INTRO programme has been designed to accelerate the development of young managers. We have also established the Management Analysis and Planning programme — or MAP for short, which is yet another acronym for Members to recall — which provides up to £7,000 of support specifically to help small organisations improve management capabilities, in line with corporate objectives. A total of 100 companies have engaged in that programme since its introduction last September.

Scottish Government Counterpart

2. **Mr Cobain** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what contacts he has had with his counterpart in the Scottish Government. (AQO 2419/08)

Sir Reg Empey: Following the appointment of Fiona Hyslop MSP, I wrote to congratulate her, and to suggest a meeting to discuss common goals. That resulted in a visit to the Scottish Parliament and a meeting with the Minister on 30 July 2007.

Mr Cobain: Did the subject arise of offering additional support to students from Northern Ireland who are going to Scotland to study?

Sir Reg Empey: Yes, that topic certainly arose. At a meeting of the British-Irish Council in this Building in July, I met the Scottish First Minister. Following that discussion, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have also raised that issue with the Scottish Executive on a number of occasions.

The Scottish First Minister agreed to examine ways, short of providing tuition-fee support, of providing additional help to students from Northern Ireland who are studying in Scotland. As a result of a subsequent meeting with my Scottish counterpart, consideration is being given to a number of options, including the

introduction of a travel-scholarship bursary, and more targeted use of hardship funds, which each of the Scottish universities currently offer. Any student can apply for those funds if he or she is experiencing hardship. Members will be aware that more than 5,000 students who are domiciled in Northern Ireland are currently studying at Scottish universities.

Mrs M Bradley: After his engagements with his Scottish counterpart, does the Minister have any hope for any form of higher-education co-operation that would compare with the scoping study that was announced recently between the University of Ulster's Magee campus and the Letterkenny Institute of Technology? Will the Minister comment on that example of potential for co-operation?

Sir Reg Empey: A specific question has been tabled on the latter matter, but there is no formal engagement on the same scale as that which is currently underway with the Letterkenny college. However, we are open to collaboration and we continuously co-operate with our colleagues in Scotland — and Wales and elsewhere — because we are aware of the fact that we send a very large number of students to Scotland every year. Indeed, a disproportionate amount of our students go there, and that is a matter of great concern.

With regard to the latter point, discussions are ongoing with our colleagues in the north-west, specifically to see if it is possible to improve that co-operation. The Member will be aware that my Department, along with the Departments of my counterparts in the Irish Government, Micheál Martin and Mary Hanafin, will be holding an all-island skills conference later this year, based in the north-west. One of the issues to be discussed is co-operation in border areas and sharing labour-market intelligence to establish that training providers in those areas — those based in further and higher education institutions as well as other training organisations — are training people to meet the needs of local employers. That is, therefore, a considerable area, in which I hope our co-operation will prove to be successful.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Part of my question has already been answered. It concerned ongoing meetings with Minister Mary Hanafin in the South, learning from each other and sharing experience and ideas about how the education and learning system here can contribute to the economy.

Sir Reg Empey: There is no doubt whatsoever that the Members who attended the first meeting of the reconvened British-Irish Council in Armagh last summer had a very full discussion. During this meeting, Minister Martin indicated the extent to which the Republic's economy had been improved and fuelled by the training

provided by the FE sector, and he emphasised the link between that training and the needs of business.

Clearly, therefore, that training has contributed to the Republic's success, and I assure the Member that part of the Department for Employment and Learning's strategy is to see the further and higher education sectors as being specifically linked to the needs of business. That is why we are holding the conference later this year. Initially, we will concentrate on the border areas, simply because we felt that was appropriate. Part of our agenda is co-operation with FÁS, as well as with other organisations under the authority of those two Departments in Dublin. That will continue as we examine the potential positive impact of our joint endeavours, particularly in the border areas that — as the Member knows only too well — have suffered considerably over the last 30 or 40 years.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

FE Lecturers: Early Retirement Regulations

4. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the impact of recent changes to the regulations governing early retirement for further education lecturers. (AQO 2480/08)

Sir Reg Empey: In the current financial year, 40 further education lecturers have taken redundancy under the teachers' premature retirement compensation scheme. In view of available resources, no further redundancies can be supported under the scheme during the 2007-08 financial year, which ends on 31 March. That does not rule out the possibility of further redundancies being effected under the scheme later in the current academic year, when they would normally occur. Any delay in the redundancy programme should be short term, and will not disrupt college reorganisation plans that may result from mergers.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his response. I understand that a decision was made recently to discontinue paying for add-on years for teachers in schools — will that decision impact on lecturers at further education colleges?

Sir Reg Empey: Let us be clear: the scheme could not take on any more redundancies this year, simply because it ran out of money. It is a very expensive programme because it involves paying added years. In the next financial year, my Department will provide some transitional help; ultimately, however, the cost of paying added years will fall to the employer. That will apply equally to teachers and university lecturers, because they are both served by the same scheme.

I am confident that the further-education sector will not be inhibited, however this situation is exceptional

because of the college mergers, as more people are availing themselves of the scheme than would normally be the case.

However, it will balance out, and in due course equilibrium will come back into the market. Nonetheless, no more applications can be accepted for the current year.

Mr Spratt: The Minister is aware that several lecturers were promised that they would be put into the early retirement scheme. I can understand why they have not been added to this tranche, but has the Minister had any discussions with the employers regarding the lecturers who were promised early retirement in the Southern Regional College? Those lecturers did not apply for jobs in the new amalgamated colleges. It is important that the commitments that were made be dealt with. Has the Minister had discussion with the employers to ensure that that will happen?

Sir Reg Empey: I am aware of those issues. However, I cannot deal with specific colleges. The lecturers who were given reason to believe that they would be included in the scheme will take priority. There have been discussions, and as soon as practicable in the next financial year — which begins next month — those individual cases will be at the top of the queue. I hope that all commitments can be honoured, but it was not financially possible to include those lecturers in the early retirement scheme in the current financial year.

Mr Durkan: Does the Minister recognise that there is an apparent contradiction for many people in further education? The Department cannot recognise the case for pay parity between college lecturers and teachers, but the change to the early retirement scheme for teachers was automatically extended by the Department. People are told that comparability applies on one occasion but not another. Will the Minister address the issue of hard charging in the longer term in relation to early retirement provisions?

Sir Reg Empey: There is no doubt that the burden of charges will fall to the colleges. We have rehearsed well the arguments in the House about pay parity, and the Member knows that I am sympathetic to that argument. However, people must be careful. Parity on pay is one matter; parity on contract is another matter. If we were to start down that road, we would open up a Pandora's box. We can deal with this issue. It has been a short-term problem. As the Member knows, the Department of Education operates the scheme. The scheme has been under exceptional pressure this year, and I suspect that that will ease. However, in future the colleges will have to bear that burden. An exceptional number of people have been seeking to use the scheme this year because of the reorganisation, but that will not continue. The colleges know and are prepared for the fact that they cannot expect the Department to

provide the added years, although it will help them out in the short term as best it can.

Ensuring Access to University Education

5. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the steps that he is taking to ensure ease of access to a university education for people from deprived backgrounds. (AQO 2481/08)

Sir Reg Empey: In the academic year 2007-08, my Department allocated approximately £2 million to support widening participation in university education for people from deprived backgrounds. That includes the Step-Up programme at the University of Ulster and the Discovering Queen's programme. In addition, a widening participation premium is paid to the universities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Support measures for the students include higher education bursaries and maintenance grants.

Mr Hamilton: For all sorts of reasons, children in care are among the most deprived groups in our society. The Minister is aware of the low educational attainment of children in care in Northern Ireland. Will he assure the House — and groups that work with children in care to help them attain higher educational achievement, such as Include Youth — that no barrier will be put in the way of children in care gaining access to higher education?

3.15 pm

Sir Reg Empey: When I visited Include Youth's headquarters, I spoke to the students, some of whom are aspiring to go to university. I was immensely impressed by the distance that some of those young people have travelled, from extremely difficult backgrounds and under difficult circumstances. My Department addresses the issue in two ways: first, the maintenance allowance here is at least £500 higher than its equivalent elsewhere; secondly, Northern Ireland has a good record of getting people from disadvantaged backgrounds into higher education — we are head and shoulders above the rest of the UK in that respect.

I have made increasing the educational attainment of young people in care a priority for my Department, and I assure the honourable Member that those individuals who are struggling are uppermost in my mind and in the minds of departmental officials. The figures illustrate that Northern Ireland is leading the United Kingdom in increasing the educational attainment of that group of young people. I commend Include Youth, and I recommend that Members visit organisations that work with those young people, some of which do so in extreme circumstances. People in Northern Ireland should be proud of their work.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I also welcome the Minister's commitment to ensuring that no barriers are placed in the way of young people in care who want to access further and higher education. However, does he agree that the retention of a university campus in an area of high deprivation is one of the best ways to ensure ease of access? Given that up to 45% of the students who attend St Mary's University College in west Belfast come from deprived backgrounds, will the Minister outline whether the Department has explored how to maintain that success and, taking such best practice on board, extend it to other areas?

Sir Reg Empey: I am not sure that I heard all the Member's points. The educational performance of young people living in areas of deprivation, such as north and west Belfast, is improving. It is beginning to get closer to the Northern Ireland average, although there is still some considerable way to go. The Department recognises that additional support mechanisms must be put in place, given the circumstances that exist in areas of deprivation, the profile and backgrounds of many of the young people and the enormous struggle that they face. The normal process whereby people simply apply for places in further and higher education off their own bat is not enough for young people from deprived areas. They need help, support and back-up to create sufficient self-belief to enable them to take the required leap forward.

The evidence supports the view that progress is being made in deprived areas, and at a faster rate than in any other part of the country; everyone should take some satisfaction from that. However, anyone who considers that the level of educational attainment is anywhere close to where it must be is foolish and wrong. The community has an enormous distance to travel even in improving basic essential skills, never mind improving access to university education. The Member who posed the question is perhaps more aware than most in the House of what I mean and of the resources that are being targeted to try to ensure that people from disadvantaged backgrounds figure largely in any future progress.

Mr Cree: I too thank the Minister for his comprehensive replies. Will he share with the House details of the specific initiatives to improve social access to higher education, and will he outline the financial assistance that is available?

Sir Reg Empey: As I said, a principal form of financial assistance is that the maximum maintenance allowance for Northern Ireland students is at least £500 higher than that of their counterparts in the rest of the UK.

The Department has maintained that throughout the current comprehensive spending review (CSR) programme, and it has done so specifically because it

believes that it is an important fundamental policy objective.

Furthermore, the universities offer bursaries, and although it has been agreed with the Department that they should provide a minimum of £300 additional assistance, in practice they offer far more. During the current year, both universities have provided approximately £1,000, which is far a greater sum than they are obliged under contract to provide. I understand that the universities are re-examining bursaries, because other issues are tied up with them, such as the subjects that students are taught.

By any standard, the Department has made proposals and has implemented more comprehensive measures to help people who are from disadvantaged backgrounds. That is why higher levels are being achieved. That success is a combination of the recognition that that is the policy that should be adopted and of practical financial provision to ensure that finance is not a barrier. The Member will also be aware that both universities operate various hardship funds for which students who are from less-well-off backgrounds can apply.

Training for Success: Review

6. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the terms of reference of the review of Training for Success, including its time frame; and whether or not it will consider (i) training opportunities for part-time workers; (ii) the capacity to award contracts to specialist training organisations addressing the needs of hard to reach groups; and (iii) the amount paid to apprentices in the construction industry.

(AQO 2453/08)

Sir Reg Empey: The terms of reference of the review of Training for Success are: first, to determine how well the new provision is being implemented; secondly, to identify any administrative problems; thirdly, to identify any gaps in provision and determine how they can be dealt with; and, fourthly, to make recommendations for any changes to the programme in the light of the review.

The Department met with the training suppliers in December 2007 and again in January and February 2008 to discuss possible revisions. The Department will be in a position to consult the Committee for Employment and Learning in March or April. Primarily, the review will examine the structure and content of training provision. The current level of available resources prevents the funding of part-time workers. A working group has been charged to examine separately whether Training for Success meets the needs of young people with disability and special needs. That group will report by June 2008. Finally, the review will examine how minimum rates of pay could be included as a condition of the Department's funding for training. At present, employers set the final rates of pay.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will be aware that the appointment of people from outside Northern Ireland has been a prominent feature of today's news. He will also be aware that a company called Carter and Carter Group plc was awarded the apprenticeship contract, but withdrew from it after six months. That company had no staff, premises or involvement in Northern Ireland. Can the Minister assure the House that the review will consider all those aspects and will deal with individuals who would benefit from the contract, particularly those who are over 25 years of age?

Sir Reg Empey: I wondered which Member would get to that matter first. I have won a bet with my officials, who now owe me a tenner.

This matter is quite serious. I want to make it clear that the provision of training contracts is carried out under European legislation. The Department contracts with the Department of Finance and Personnel's procurement division, which runs competitions on our behalf. The procurement division is also consulted — as it was in the case to which the Member has referred — on the management of a contract and on any concerns that my Department has with that.

People must understand that there is no legal requirement for a company to have premises in Northern Ireland. A company in Northern Ireland can apply to provide training in Czechoslovakia, regardless of whether it has premises there. That is part of the European system. The Department simply applied that precisely and to the law in Northern Ireland, having taken DFP's advice.

I hope that the Member will not mind if I take a bit longer to answer his question; I am sure that he wants to hear the details. He will be aware that that company was contracted to deliver level 2 and level 3 training in transportation operation and maintenance. That training began in September 2007.

The Member will be aware that the founder and chief executive of that company was killed in a helicopter crash last year and that the company got into difficulty and had its shares suspended. Nevertheless, it has been provided with resources from its banks, and it is still trading. Furthermore, it recently won a large contract from the Department for Work and Pensions.

We asked the Education and Training Inspectorate to undertake an assessment of the training that took place from September 2007 to January 2008, which is normal practice. The inspectorate reported strength in the standards of training that were achieved in the workplace and in the direct training provided in body repair and refinishing. However, it also reported deficiencies in direct training, in arrangements for monitoring and assessment, and in the provision of training facilities, recruitment and support for trainees outside the greater Belfast area.

Taken together, those deficiencies represented a breach of the company's contract with the Department. The company was asked to remedy those deficiencies by 1 March 2008, but informed the Department of Finance and Personnel's Central Procurement Directorate on 28 February 2008 that it could not give the assurances and guarantees required to continue with the provision. As such, the contract was ended on 1 March 2008. My officials are currently arranging for those young people affected to be accommodated by other training organisations to enable their training to continue.

That is the detail of that particular issue. We had to ensure that any decisions taken complied with European law, which is why we engaged the Department of Finance and Personnel's procurement division.

Mr Shannon: The Minister is aware of the expansion of the retail sector and of the necessity to develop the hospitality industry, especially in the light of the current increase in tourism throughout the Province, although I, of course, have a particular interest in the Strangford area. As those sectors are largely made up of part-time workers and operate seven days a week, does the Minister agree that a strategy is required to deliver vocational training and qualifications to those hard-to-reach employees?

Sir Reg Empey: I recently visited People 1st, one of the providers of training for the hospitality sector — I think that I have got the name right. That industry faces a mixture of problems: there is an issue not only about the esteem in which the community holds that particular industry, but, let us be honest, about pay and conditions. My Department cannot be responsible for all such issues.

I notice that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has entered the Chamber, and this issue is relevant to him. Tourism is one of the sectors with the greatest potential for expansion, as is evidenced by the open-topped buses that tour Belfast. Compared to our nearest competitors, we are operating at just over half of our potential.

We are acutely aware of the problem. Over the past few years, we have perhaps lost our way a bit regarding the provision of the training; however, it is now much more focused. The industry realises that, in the recent past, we have been relying heavily on migrant labour. If that labour disappears, where are we going to be left? That will be a big issue in the future.

I understand fully the need for strong and effective training for that sector. I assure the Member that my Department, and, indeed, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, is fully engaged in that sector. We believe that there is huge potential for growth in Northern Ireland.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 1 stands in the name of Barry McElduff, who is not in the Chamber. Therefore, we will move on.

Highly Skilled Jobs

2. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps he was taking to attract more highly skilled jobs to Fermanagh. (AQO 2431/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): The Programme for Government includes a target to promote 6,500 new inward-investment jobs, 5,500 of which will have salaries above the private-sector median. Those targets refer to Northern Ireland as a region; they are not broken down to a subregional level, including Fermanagh.

Invest Northern Ireland offers its clients — wherever they are located in Northern Ireland — access to a large suite of programmes that are designed to improve their productivity and become internationally competitive. Those are demand led, and depend on clients submitting viable development projects.

3.30 pm

Invest Northern Ireland client and business-development executives work closely with prospective and existing clients to identify growth opportunities. In the Fermanagh and South Tyrone area, that work has led to almost 900 offers of assistance. Since 2002, that assistance has been worth £24.9 million. That work has also generated investment of £132.2 million in the constituency, including support for 11 new foreign direct investments from key companies such as British Telecom and Quinn Direct.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister accept that tourism is one of the leading investment opportunities in Northern Ireland and in Fermanagh? With no signature project in the county, or even the constituency, what progress has been made by his Department on the Destination Fermanagh strategy?

Mr Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. He is quite right to talk about the importance of tourism, and that mirrors the question that has just been responded to by the Minister for Employment and Learning.

Fermanagh places a very strong focus on tourism. The entire tourism sector is earmarked for strong growth, which will be reflected in the number of visitors to Fermanagh and the amount of spend on tourism in that area. The five tourism signature projects are designed

to promote Northern Ireland as a major tourist destination for out-of-state visitors. Fermanagh's tourism sector received a strong boost with the growth in numbers of profitable hotels and, notably, with the recent opening of the Lough Erne golf resort and spa. That represents a very positive development in relation to tourism provision in the Fermanagh area.

Mr Gallagher: Fermanagh is an attractive place to live, and it has a great deal going for it. There is to be investment in a new skills centre in Enniskillen, but the area lacks research-and-development facilities. Has the Minister's Department examined the possibility of developing such facilities in the area? Has he considered that in a cross-border context, because money may be made available from the Republic of Ireland for the development of that type of facility?

Mr Dodds: I would be very happy to look into that matter. Some of those issues are dealt with in co-operation with other Departments in the Executive. We want to see the creation of more highly skilled jobs in Northern Ireland, and the type of centre that the Member referred to would help to promote and sustain those.

There are ambitious targets in the Programme for Government for more highly skilled jobs, which will be for the entire Province. It is important that Fermanagh and other areas play their part in that. I am pleased to note that there have been major investments in the Fermanagh area recently, which have provided highly skilled jobs. I hope that there will be more announcements along those lines in the not-too-distant future.

Lord Morrow: The Minister is no doubt aware of recent job losses in County Fermanagh. Can he tell us the position in respect of the recent closure of the Moy Park plant in Lisnaskea?

Mr Dodds: Moy Park formally closed its Lisnaskea plant in September 2006. That decision was taken as a direct result of global pressures on the poultry industry. The company had been in close contact with Invest Northern Ireland, and it has received selected financial assistance. The company sold the factory to Western Brand Group in October 2006.

Invest Northern Ireland is currently in negotiations with Western Brand Group on a range of initiatives. I am hopeful that those negotiations will result in a very positive outcome, but we will have to wait and see what happens.

Tourists Arriving By Air

3. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of tourists arriving directly into Northern Ireland by air from (a) Europe, and (b) the United States of America; and (ii) to provide his assessment of how these figures compare

with the position over the previous five years.
(AQO 2485/08)

Mr Dodds: In 2007, an estimated 89,367 staying visitors arrived directly into Northern Ireland by air from mainland Europe, which represents a 244% increase since 2002. In the same year, an estimated 17,649 staying visitors arrived on direct scheduled flights from the United States. There were no direct scheduled flights from the USA five years ago, but that figure represents a 139% increase since 2005. I am sure that all Members will agree that those figures are very encouraging and reflect the significant increase in Northern Ireland's international air connectivity that has taken place in recent years.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his very positive response, as air travel is important now and for the future. Will there be any new direct routes between Northern Ireland and mainland Europe and between Northern Ireland and the USA in the near future? I believe, as do many other Members, that there is great tourism potential to be realised by introducing such routes.

Mr Dodds: I share the Member's view that direct international connections offer enormous potential for tourism and investment. Recently, an investor in Northern Ireland who provided services and trade with the United States told me that the direct flight between Belfast and Newark in New Jersey was an extremely positive development that greatly facilitated business dealings.

At present, 36 direct scheduled flights fly from Europe to Northern Ireland, providing direct access from 10 European countries. In addition, Aer Lingus plans to operate two further scheduled flights from mainland Europe — namely from Nice and Paris — into Belfast International Airport. Those flights are due to commence shortly, along with a flight from Las Vegas which will be operated by MyTravel. However, it should be noted that Jet2 recently announced that its flight to Prague will cease this month.

By way of context, those direct international flights and connections are in addition to the 43 air routes now operating into Northern Ireland out of Great Britain, Canada, the Isle of Man, Jersey and the Irish Republic. The picture is very positive compared with the situation just a few years ago.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What percentage of visitors to the North from Europe and the USA travelled into Dublin and subsequently travelled North?

Mr Dodds: I will write to the Member with those statistics and ensure that a copy of my response is left in the Library for all Members to see. As I said, the number of visitors travelling directly to Northern Ireland from both Europe and the States has improved significantly. There has also been a significant increase in the

number of visitors travelling into Northern Ireland via the Irish Republic. It is my desire — and I am sure that it is the desire of all Members — to persuade those visitors who travel to the Irish Republic but who do not travel to Northern Ireland to visit here. It is essential, given the investment in Tourism Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, that tourist numbers increase. I am determined to see that happen, and I am sure that we would all agree that that would be a positive move. To ensure that that happens, we must invest not just in marketing but also in the signature projects. We must also invest in skills and in hotels and other accommodation to ensure that when people visit, they have a first-class experience and somewhere decent to stay.

Mr K Robinson: I am heartened by the Minister's comments. Is he aware of any special plans that Tourism Ireland has to capitalise on the US investment conference in May? Will the Minister ensure that in order to maximise the total impact of that prestigious event, conference delegates can see the tourist sights and facilities that Northern Ireland has to offer?

Mr Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. He will not be surprised to hear that many suggestions are being made on how best the conference can be organised to maximise Northern Ireland's investment and tourist potential.

I am keen to use the time with those who are coming to the maximum advantage of all of Northern Ireland. We are carrying out consultation and discussion, not just with businesspeople and the stakeholders who are part of the steering group, but we are planning to consult with local councils, community organisations and others. Part of that work will involve ensuring that people will have an opportunity to see parts of Northern Ireland not only from a business perspective but as potential tourist locations also.

Review of Public Administration

4. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the discussions he has had with local councils in relation to the review of public administration.
(AQO 2423/08)

Mr Dodds: I had a constructive meeting with representatives from the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and local government officials on 13 December 2007 to discuss the review of public administration (RPA). The meeting focused on the departmental functions that would be transferred to local councils and on the wider work that my Department is undertaking to develop a new enterprise strategy for Northern Ireland. In addition, departmental officials have had a number of positive engagements with local government representatives in relation to RPA.

Mr Craig: I am pleased to hear that the Minister is meeting representatives from local government, and it is good to hear that he plans to devolve some powers to local councils. Does the Minister intend to keep responsibility for petroleum licensing with local councils?

Mr Dodds: I was pleased with the positive engagement that we had with local government in the areas that my Department is responsible for and that are to be transferred. It is proper to ensure that the policy framework underlying RPA — to strengthen local government while retaining effective local and regional bodies — is upheld. That is the approach that my Department is taking.

Members may be aware that, following public consultation, it had been proposed that petroleum licensing be transferred from local councils to the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland. I met with representatives from the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), NILGA and the chief environmental health officers in February 2008. At that meeting, I proposed — and it was agreed — that petroleum licensing should remain with local councils but that, under a new dual approach, they would work in partnership with a fuel/oils liaison group to be established in the Health and Safety Executive.

That is the right and proper approach. Although it may be different from what was suggested under direct rule, I do not apologise for changing the policy because it is now in line with the strengthening of local government through RPA and creates a more effective regime to ensure that petroleum licensing is enforced as consistently and effectively as possible on filling stations across Northern Ireland.

Mr Durkan: The Minister referred to his meetings with local-government interests. Across the region, local government supports local enterprise agencies and their umbrella organisation, Enterprise Northern Ireland, which — along with councils — shared concerns about the possible loss of traction in support for local enterprise and social-economic activities under previous RPA proposals. The Minister has met with enterprise agencies. What assurances has he offered Enterprise Northern Ireland in support of its efforts to help the start up of small businesses, and how can those assurances be squared with recent decisions on funding for the Start a Business programme?

Mr Dodds: The Member will be aware that one issue before the Department was where responsibility for social economy, and issues surrounding it, should lie. I have decided that the responsibility should remain with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, a decision which has been welcomed not just by those in the social-economy network but also by Members.

I have had a number of meetings with people involved in the social economy and with Enterprise Northern

Ireland. As regards the Start a Business programme, the suggestions and proposals that we are putting forward will help benefit help business start-ups.

The proposals mean, as was always intended, that bids will have to be made for the delivery of that programme. The changes to the content of the programme have been widely welcomed, and they are in line with the review that was carried out to ensure that the maximum amount of assistance is put in to developing start-up companies from small entities into larger entities and to develop more of them into exporters. That is needed for the new Northern Ireland economy.

3.45 pm

Mr Beggs: The RPA has now been going on for some seven years. Does the Minister accept that an outsider would consider that the process is taking an inordinate amount of time to complete? Will he agree that, if positive progress cannot be made shortly, the review of local government will lose credibility? Furthermore, does the Minister agree that the failure to implement changes that would enhance local government's planning and economic development role could inhibit the Northern Ireland economy from reaching its full potential?

Mr Dodds: I am sure that a lot of Members share the Member's frustration with the length of time that it has taken to sort out the review of public administration. When the Assembly was set up again, the consensus in the House was that the matter should be considered by the locally devolved Administration and by local Members. There was a degree of scepticism and concern about the way in which direct rule Ministers had been pushing forward on the policy. The fact that we decided to take a bit more time to consider what was best for the people of Northern Ireland, rather than what direct rule Ministers thought was best, was widely welcomed in the House and outside it.

However, we want to move forward as quickly as possible. I understand that proposals will come before the Executive soon. I have always been keen to ensure that if any of the economic development and tourism functions for which my Department is responsible can be delivered most appropriately at local government level, they should be delivered at that level. My Department has played a constructive role in moving the RPA process forward.

Assisting Local Businesses

5. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail Invest Northern Ireland's policy for assisting businesses that need to relocate, because of growth, but wish to remain in the same locality. (AQO 2425/08)

Mr Dodds: Invest Northern Ireland provides a range of property solutions to enable its client companies to implement growth projects. The agency acquires suitable land, procures the development of the relevant infrastructure, manages the assets and sells sites in support of client-company expansion plans. Client demand for land is now at a record level, mainly due to the shortage of good-quality affordable land in Northern Ireland. Land that has remained vacant for many years is now more attractive and is subject to client interest.

Where possible, Invest NI will seek to facilitate in situ growth projects with its clients. However, the scale of the proposed expansion and/or the restrictions of the land that is available at an existing site may mean that that is not always possible. In such cases, Invest NI works with the client to identify other potential sites and suitable locations through its online property database, and by using its contacts with commercial estate agents across the Province. In addition to its own landholding, which is available to client companies, Invest NI actively markets land and property that is held in the private sector through the online database, which can be accessed through its web portal.

Mr Armstrong: Invest Northern Ireland sees its client companies that export as its main businesses. Between the new business starts and the exporters, there are many growing businesses that need encouragement. Is the Minister satisfied that enough is being done for that significant sector of businesses?

Mr Dodds: We must never be complacent or totally satisfied. We must push on as hard as possible to ensure that every available opportunity to maximise return to the economy is taken. The Member raised an important point about local indigenous companies. The key to driving forward the economy is to get more and more of those companies to become more outward-looking, export-focused and export-orientated.

When considering use of the public purse and public intervention to meet the demand for land, and for property solutions, the Member will be aware that we must bear in mind value for money to the taxpayer. We would be rightly criticised if we were to simply favour one local employer or company over another if there were no extra added value to the economy.

Therefore, we must adopt that basic criterion. It is a question of bringing extra value to the economy through either foreign direct investment or growth of local business and finding solutions — including property solutions — that fit best in that context.

Dr McDonnell: The main issue raised with me by business owners is that it takes three years to receive planning approval for a proposal that may create 20, 30, 40 or 50 jobs. Will the Minister detail what discussions, if any, he has had with the Minister of the Environment

to address the planning obstacles faced by businesses that want to expand, relocate and develop their business?

Mr Dodds: That is an important point that has been made in the House previously, not only in the context of investment opportunities. I am sure that the Minister of the Environment is aware of those concerns. From my Department's perspective, Invest NI seeks to ensure that a significant amount of land in Northern Ireland is zoned for industrial purposes for the needs of client companies. We also work closely with the Planning Service to develop area plans. By ensuring that land is appropriately zoned, we can provide the private sector with an opportunity to develop land for industrial development purposes.

Invest NI will, at times, intervene to resist change-of-use applications that relate to significant portions of land. That is to ensure that land will be available to meet the concerns that are raised constantly in the House. Sometimes that is done in the teeth of bitter opposition from local councils and local representatives who submit competing interests. That is fair enough, but maintaining a balance is not simple, and the Department understands that land prices are rising and land is more valuable in the context of residential developments.

We must examine the issue of planning not only in the context of the Member's question about speediness in the planning application process but to ensure that enough good land is available to meet the needs of local companies and foreign direct investors. It is a question of balance.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister confirm that Invest NI has coaxed and cajoled Aetopia — a west Belfast-based software company — to relocate from its base on the peace line on the Springfield Road to help fund units at the Titanic Quarter? Given that the people of west Belfast and the Shankill area are calling for more economic investment, why would Invest NI encourage employment and successful businesses to leave the area?

Mr Dodds: I cannot answer that question because I did not receive notice of it and am not aware of the details that the Member mentioned. However, I will look into that matter. I know people who work and live in north and west Belfast and the greater Shankill area, and it would take an awful lot to cajole and force them into doing anything against their will.

However, as Members are aware, the issue of location of job opportunities must be addressed. It is important that every area receives a fair share of investment opportunities. Statistics show that only approximately 40% of workers in the West Belfast constituency live there. Ensuring investment in Lagan Valley, South Antrim and other areas of Belfast is important in order to provide job opportunities for the residents of West Belfast. The figures are similar in other parts of

Belfast. Location is important, but it is not the be-all and end-all, because people will, quite rightly, seek job opportunities beyond their local area.

Promoting Northern Ireland

6. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the steps that Tourism Ireland is taking to promote Northern Ireland in those locations in North America and Europe that operate direct inward flights. (AQO 2442/08)

Mr Dodds: Tourism Ireland is planning a number of campaigns to promote Northern Ireland in North America and Europe, which will focus on direct-access gateways. That body is working closely with carriers and other industry partners. In Germany, for instance, Tourism Ireland and easyJet will run an advertising campaign for the Berlin-Belfast service; in France, Tourism Ireland will link with Aer Lingus in staging a co-operative advertising campaign to launch the Paris-Belfast route, which opens on 31 March; and, in Spain, an e-marketing campaign is planned for April to highlight the accessibility of Northern Ireland, and extensive promotions will run to support the new Barcelona-Belfast service.

In North America, Tourism Ireland has secured major exposure for Northern Ireland in the Continental Airlines vacation brochure for 2008. Furthermore, Tourism Ireland will undertake an advertising campaign in April in major newspaper titles in the southern states that target the Scots Irish.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his reply. He mentioned promotional campaigns that have been carried out in such places as Germany, France and Spain. Are similar initiatives being considered in other European countries, especially the likes of Hungary, to and from which direct flights from Belfast have been introduced recently?

Mr Dodds: The Member highlights an important issue. Northern Ireland now has the opportunity to win tourism and visitors from areas beyond those to which we traditionally looked for visitors. As some Members said, when one mentions Europe, one thinks invariably of such countries as France, Germany and Spain, and when considering countries further afield, one normally thinks of the United States. However, Hungary, for instance, offers an opportunity for us. When the flight service was launched between Budapest and Belfast, Tourism Ireland arranged for a large number of journalists to travel the route so that they could get a flavour of what Northern Ireland had to offer at first hand.

Northern Ireland and its direct access gateways have been a key feature for Tourism Ireland at a number of travel fairs throughout Europe.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh míle maith agat. Given that the Irish language identifies, adds character to and is attractive to tourists to Ireland, how is the Minister seeking to exploit — visually and otherwise — the promotion and development of the potential of our native language in this part of the country?

Mr Dodds: I have said on a number of occasions that the cultural tourism opportunities that are provided by Ulster Scots, festivals, parades and the Irish language contribute to Northern Ireland's tourism potential. People tend to come to Northern Ireland — or to any region — for a mix of reasons, not solely for one reason. Sometimes when they come to a region, they see an opportunity to explore something that they had not thought of.

The Irish language is the same as anything else. It is being promoted through websites, Tourism Ireland, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and so forth, and it is a matter for those who are involved in the language to ensure that they maximise the marketing opportunities that are available to them.

Mr Savage: Our American cousins are only now becoming aware of the Scots-Irish connection to their early Presidents from the eastern states. What is Tourism Ireland's strategy to capitalise on the Americans' interest in their roots?

Mr Dodds: The Member makes an important point, and, as I said in my response to Mr Storey, Tourism Ireland secured major exposure for Northern Ireland in the Continental Airlines vacation brochure. Furthermore, Tourism Ireland has undertaken an advertising campaign for April in newspapers in the southern states and in the states that the Member referred to, which target the Scots Irish or, as we know them, the Ulster Scots. A lot of effort is, therefore, being put into the American connections. I am keen to encourage that, because every opportunity to maximise the number of tourists that come from the United States — in markets that were untapped — is to be welcomed. The new resources that I have given to Tourism Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board for that purpose should be used to maximise visitors who come to Northern Ireland from all quarters.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Housing in the Village Area of South Belfast

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the debate will have 15 minutes to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately eight minutes.

4.00 pm

Mr Spratt: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am delighted that the Business Committee has afforded me the opportunity to bring to the Floor a major issue in my constituency of South Belfast. The Village area and wider Donegall Road community is an area that suffered from years of neglect under direct rule. Deterioration for 30 years has resulted in over 30% of the housing stock in the area being unfit for purpose in the twenty-first century.

Some of the housing in the greater Village area ranks among the worst in Northern Ireland. Yes, there are some very good houses in the area. For others, however, massive improvement is needed to address such issues as damp, lack of heating and no inside toilets, to name but a few. Although some areas were redeveloped several times during the Troubles, a community one mile from the centre of Belfast suffered and was ignored. It is in areas such as that that devolution must make a difference. Loyalist areas suffered greatly during the Troubles and we must now look at ways in which we can put right the years of neglect. Devolution — and we as representatives in a devolved Administration — have a duty to make better the lives of those who elect us. A basic right is that people have good housing.

This debate was tabled well in advance of the announcement by the Minister for Social Development Margaret Ritchie of her financial commitment to the regeneration of the Village area. I warmly welcome that commitment and thank the Minister for her interest in the matter. When I spoke to the Minister about the need for urgent action in the area, she was ready and willing to listen. Now that the announcement has been made, the community wishes to thank her. The community also wishes to thank the Minister of Finance and Personnel, my party colleague Peter Robinson, for giving the Minister for Social Development the necessary financial resources to give the people of the Village better housing. As with Ms Ritchie, I noted that Mr Robinson had a real desire to help the area in any way that he could. Some people pointed a finger at

Peter Robinson for failing the Village: it is quite clear that he played a vital role in delivering for the area.

Amid the euphoria of some people in the Village community, however, others are concerned about how regeneration will be rolled out. The Minister for Social Development must try to alleviate the concerns of those people. They welcome her commitment to regeneration but are unclear how it will be brought about. I have sought answers on the matter from the Department for Social Development. I welcome the Minister's taking the time to attend this debate and hope that she can provide me with some answers. I have not yet had any clear indication from the Department on the way forward.

I have received correspondence from homeowners who have no association with any group in the Village but who are concerned about what regeneration holds for them. They are worried that, after redevelopment, they might not get a house of a similar size to their current property. They are also concerned that a personal financial penalty will be the price paid for the regeneration of the large quantity of social-housing stock.

I urge the Minister to continue to press ahead with plans for redevelopment, but to attempt along the way to alleviate the fears of some who live in the area. Furthermore, I urge the Minister to make it clear when the regeneration process will commence, and to ensure that the community is kept well informed as the process is rolled out. The Department for Social Development and the Housing Executive must listen to the wishes of the community as they formulate the details of regeneration. Information, and how it is conveyed to the community in the Village, will be essential. We do not want hold-ups or obstacles. A community that is kept well informed about the decision-making will be the key to the whole process.

As part of the regeneration process, we must also address the massive problem of vacant properties in the Village area.

A large number of properties in Donegall Avenue, Soudan Street, Kitchener Street and other streets are blocked up. Indeed, many properties have been blocked up for a number of years. That is a major problem requiring urgent action. One of my constituents informed me recently that vermin can be seen in Donegall Avenue in broad daylight — an area that is home to young families. We must ensure that such risks are eliminated as soon as possible. Vacant properties become a breeding ground for vermin and must be dealt with.

I am encouraged by the presence of my fellow South Belfast MLAs in the Chamber. I am sure that they wish to contribute so I have no intention of hogging the debate. I assure the Minister that I will continue to pepper her with Assembly questions on the matter — at the infancy of the process and as it rolls out. All

parties can unite around this issue, and there should not be any attempts to marginalise a particular party. The community must get behind what is happening. We cannot allow this great opportunity for regeneration to be lost; if that were to happen, the suffering of my constituents would be the cost.

The community is broadly behind regeneration but I accept that there are differences in opinion about some of the specific details. Therefore, I urge the Department for Social Development to treat each constituent with due care and consideration, and endeavour to alleviate their concerns. We want a sustainable community in the Village and wider Donegall Road area, with the quality of housing that the good people there deserve. The basic services that any sustainable community requires must also be in place. There is a large population in the area and yet there is no doctor's surgery that is easily accessible for pensioners. That is one of the further aspects that need to be addressed by the Assembly and local representatives.

The most urgent concern is housing, but I assure my constituents that that is only one issue that I will be working on in an attempt to make the entire Donegall Road, and the Village, a better area to live in. I thank the Minister for attending the debate and look forward to hearing what she has to say.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend the Member for putting the plight of the residents of the Village area on the agenda this afternoon. I welcome the opportunity to address the matter along with the Member and the other representatives of South Belfast. I, too, thank the Minister for being in attendance for this afternoon's debate.

I strongly commend the residents of that area. They have come together and put a renewed focus on the needs of the people in that area, particularly in recent years. Some individuals and organisations have worked tirelessly for a number of years. However, in recent times, many more people have come on board, which has put much greater focus on the plight caused by substandard conditions in the district. It is to their credit that the matter is now being addressed by the Minister, both in her budget and in her statements in the House. The Minister's contributions have been very welcome, particularly — I am sure — to the people who live in that area.

Since being elected as a representative for South Belfast, I have had a number of meetings with people from that area. They have begun to recognise that the area has been neglected for far too long. I do not need to rehearse that this afternoon, but many people in that area felt aggrieved at the degree of neglect that they had suffered: they felt strongly that their wishes and demands had not been listened to. I hope that that is fundamentally changing. Indeed, the Minister recently

made announcements that greatly encouraged those people.

People from the Village and surrounding area have placed their concerns about housing conditions on the public record very well; particularly those, for example, in which older residents have had to live in, and endure, conditions that are totally unacceptable nowadays.

All those conditions have been clearly identified. As Jimmy Spratt said, it is not simply a question of housing; there are other infrastructural deficits in the district. There is a need for more localised retail outlets, doctors' surgeries, and activities for young people in the area.

I place on record my thanks to the local management of the Housing Executive, who have worked hard with the community in recent years to help it to formulate its ideas and give it support and help in quantifying its needs. Not all sides agree with one another week in week out; nevertheless, in recent times there has been much more co-operation than previously. That benefits the people of that community.

There is no question that communities close to the city centre feel much aggrieved; similar conditions may be found in the Markets and in parts of the Lower Ormeau. In this day and age that is unacceptable.

I commend all those who have come together on this matter in recent years, although I do not forget those who have been working on it for a long time. Their efforts have put the issue back on the agenda. I have made the point at residents' meetings that what residents do not need is more glossy documents explaining their problems and making false commitments. They are a legacy of the past.

I commend all those who have made the plight of the residents of the Village a matter of public importance and one that is now obtaining some redress.

I welcome the Minister's recent announcement that £7 million will be spent on the area and, in the longer term, the investment of £100 million. I would appreciate if the Minister could outline the time frames involved and the first steps.

I ask the question posed by Jimmy Spratt: to what extent will the community be structurally involved in discussions? They live in the area, and we want them to have ownership of their community and to rebuild it in a positive and sustainable fashion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McGimpsey: I speak as a representative of South Belfast, not as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

I welcome the debate. This is not the first time that the House has discussed the Village, but it is an appropriate time to do so. The Village has the largest concentration of unfit housing anywhere in Northern Ireland. We have seen other areas of Belfast systematically

redeveloped over the past 25 or 30 years, whereas the Village and that end of the Donegall Road have been singled out for omission by the authorities throughout that period.

That has created deep frustration and anger in the Village, as people have watched their community deteriorate and their young families drift away. Fourteen per cent of houses are blocked up and large numbers are unfit for habitation. The balance of the community has been skewed: young families and middle aged people have left, leaving the elderly.

As I have said before, it is an indictment of the Housing Executive that it has allowed such housing conditions to continue for so long. However, I pay tribute to the people of the Village and to the organisation that represents them — the Greater Village Regeneration Trust. Over the past 11 years, it has led the fight from the ground up. It is a community-driven initiative that will not take no for an answer. The trust has refused to accept that the area is earmarked for destruction and redevelopment in another way. It has campaigned constantly over the years.

I am well aware of that because, over the years, I have been involved and played my part, although that has been small compared to the efforts of the communities in that area, which all want redevelopment.

4.15 pm

I arranged for direct rule Ministers, such as John Spellar and David Hanson, to visit the Village area, and they smiled, gave the right answers and nodded in the right directions; however, nothing happened. Therefore, I was delighted when devolution occurred, and one of the first things I did was to invite Margaret Ritchie for a walkabout in the area in order to let her see the conditions and to discuss matters with the Greater Village Regeneration Trust and the local community. A consequence of having a Minister with the power and inclination to take the Housing Executive by the scruff of the neck and move things along has been that that initiative has clearly made a huge difference.

In addition, she refused to accept the draft Budget, which would not have enabled her to do anything in the area. By arguing and fighting for additional money, she has been able to identify further resources, and I therefore welcome Margaret Ritchie's announcement of the Village area's redevelopment, beginning with an investment of £7 million and followed by — in positive answer to my request — a further £100 million redevelopment initiative.

The key considerations now are the pace of delivery and ensuring that pressure is maintained on the Housing Executive to approve plans and business cases in order that the redevelopment package can proceed and that the area and community can be saved and allowed to regenerate itself.

Given that the Housing Executive has now been given the authority and a push from the Minister, I look forward to hosting another visit to the Village area in the near future, if the Minister is available, in order to review progress, and I will be interested to hear from her what will be happening on the ground in the ensuing months.

In this day and age, it is absolutely unacceptable for people to have to live in such conditions. No people — in any society — should be asked to live in the conditions that exist in many of the houses in the Village area, which includes the largest concentration of unfit housing — 1,300 houses — anywhere in Northern Ireland. It is a shame and a disgrace and an indictment of the past 30 years, and I look forward to rapid redevelopment in the near future and to hearing from the Minister at the end of the debate.

Dr McDonnell: I echo the sentiments of those Members who have already spoken and, no doubt, those who will come after me. In particular, I thank our honourable colleague Mr Spratt for securing this Adjournment debate. Like him, I have worked with some of the people from that area, particularly those in the Greater Village Regeneration Trust (GVRT), who were forced to scream in despair about the housing situation. I felt strongly about the issue, but, like others, I had difficulty getting the message through while direct rule existed.

There is, and has been for a long time, a housing crisis in the Donegall Road, or Village, area of South Belfast. In extreme cases, the people who reside there, many of whom are elderly, are forced to live in atrocious housing conditions reminiscent of those in a Dickens novel. Their houses have no heat, electricity or running water, and others — the lucky ones — have only outside toilet facilities. It is totally unacceptable and shameful that, in 2008, people must endure such primitive circumstances.

If we are to be honest with ourselves, we must all share a little bit of the responsibility. Although primary responsibility rested with direct rule Ministers, we should all share a sense of responsibility that the situation in our community was allowed to continue and that people were left for so long to feel the despair that was evident in every discussion that I had with them.

We must ask ourselves why those people were abandoned and forced to live in such atrocious conditions for so long. That question will hang in the air until we have remedied their circumstances. They were left to suffer years of abandonment and neglect under direct rule. Despite the undeniable reality that many houses in the area were unfit to live in, and the hard fight that the local community put up for redevelopment and regeneration, the community leaders were misled from time to time, and all the residents got were empty

promises that, in the end, went unfulfilled. That continued until a few weeks ago, when, on 25 February in the Assembly, the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, gave an explicit and unwavering commitment to that community, which has been backed by substantial resources. We are grateful to her for that.

In that statement, Margaret Ritchie allocated £7 million to tackling the crisis immediately, with £100 million to follow. In Margaret, we have a Minister who is determined and committed to bring to an end the misery that has been endured in the Village for a long time. One of her first acts as a Minister was to visit that area with me and Michael McGimpsey and a number of others, and she very quickly pledged her support. She saw the conditions of the houses in the area and the misery experienced by the people living in them. She saw the lack of sanitation and washing facilities in many of the houses, and saw elderly people who were housebound, with little support, and with none of the mod cons that most of the rest of us take for granted. Unlike direct rule Ministers, she has kept her word and has followed through on her commitment.

The refurbishment of housing in the Village may be the biggest plank in the regeneration of the area, but we must look at other planks of that project and view it as a whole. The green light has been given on housing and, at last, regeneration can start. Meetings will take place between planners and the community to finalise some of the details of that redevelopment. The people are finally being listened to, but the situation in the Village can teach us a few things. That shows us what a determined community can achieve.

I have been pleased to work with community organisations there, particularly the Greater Village Regeneration Trust. I commend Paula Bradshaw for her tremendous and sterling effort as the trust's director. I also commend the hard work of Councillor Bob Stoker, aided and abetted by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in his capacity as a constituency MLA. They have worked very hard to highlight housing need in the area and have pushed the regeneration agenda.

The regeneration of the Village and the work that has begun there is one of the best examples of how devolution can work for all of us, and how it works for local people. I do not believe that that would have had happened if a direct rule Minister were still responsible for housing, instead of Margaret Ritchie. The public delight of ordinary people in that community was clear to see on the various television programmes that were broadcast after the Minister's statement.

I do not want to take too much comfort from the show so far — it is important to get things moving even more quickly than we had anticipated. It is

possible that a unanimous agreement may not exist locally, and there may well be a public hearing. However, we should not allow that to constrain the work that must be done now. The story does not end here — the regeneration and redevelopment of the Village must extend beyond housing.

I have a particular concern about education in the Village. Three primary schools in the area are in a run-down condition and are in difficulty. A new amalgamated primary school is required to replace them. The children there also need a secondary school with which they can identify.

I do not want to take up any more time, but I thank all those who are involved. I thank Mr Spratt for securing the debate, and I thank the Minister for the tremendous lift that she has given to the people of the Village. I look forward to continuing this debate some other time. A good start has been made, but there is more to be done.

Ms Lo: I thank Mr Spratt for securing the debate. Housing is a very important issue for South Belfast, so I welcome the Minister's recent announcement to regenerate the Village. Redevelopment of that area was discussed for almost nine years, but very little happened during that time.

Like other Members, I commend GVRT and the housing focus committee for taking a very active role in the consultation process and for lobbying the statutory bodies and MLAs.

Since becoming one of the MLAs for the area, I have spoken to the trust on several occasions about the redevelopment of the Village. Last week, I took a walk around it with Paula Bradshaw and saw the poor housing conditions. I support fully the Department for Social Development (DSD) plan to proceed immediately, and I endorse the views of previous Members who have spoken about the need for speedy action to begin redevelopment in the area.

However, change brings uncertainties, doubts and concerns to any area. My constituency office has received correspondence from local homeowners, and we attended a meeting of a local homeowners' association. Indeed, I will represent some of their views. Although they support the overall regeneration idea, some residents are concerned that they have not been consulted properly or fully, and they would like to have a greater say in future plans and processes. Therefore, any future DSD consultation on the overall redevelopment must bear in mind that anyone who is interested should be included in the overall process.

Homeowners in the area feel that they have invested a great deal of time and money in their homes, and, understandably, they are afraid that their investment may be lost completely. They have fears about not being guaranteed a similar home to their current one, or, through vesting, about being offered less money

than their home is worth. The Department should assure those homeowners that they will be treated fairly and that they will be eligible for the house-sales scheme, with an appropriate discount of the market value.

There are also fears that the number of housing units will be reduced, forcing some people to move out of the area. There are concerns about the possible disintegration of the community. The Department must be open and transparent in its planning process, and it must inform residents as soon as possible of the streets that will be replaced, the type of housing that will replace them and the number of new houses that will be built. Like other Members, I call for immediate action on the redevelopment of the area.

4.30 pm

Mrs Hanna: I thank Mr Spratt for raising the issue of housing in the Village area. As Members will know, most of the Village is in the Blackstaff ward, and I was first elected to Belfast City Council for the Balmoral electoral area in 1997 and then to the Assembly in 1998.

I hope that Mr Spratt feels that the immediate £7 million housing regeneration package for the Village that was announced by Margaret Ritchie on 26 February — before he tabled this topic for debate — is a good start towards addressing housing needs in that area. As the Minister made clear, the designation of the Village as an urban-renewal area will kick-start a full redevelopment process and trigger a total investment of, hopefully, around £100 million.

I commend the Minister on what she has done. Although she has been in office for less than a year, she went to see for herself the appalling housing conditions in the Village. She took some flak, and she made certain commitments. As she said, the people in that area have been strung along for many years, with promises made by those with power and influence. She is the first person who has backed up her promises with substantive proposals, and I commend her for that.

In 1996, the Housing Executive offered the area a regeneration plan, which, unfortunately, was rejected for various reasons. As the Minister said, it is now “all systems go” for the work to begin to tackle the housing crisis in the Village.

The Minister said that people there have had to endure — as we have seen — substandard housing for far too long. She gave her word that she would not forget those people, and with a housing budget allocation increased and finalised by the Minister for Finance and Personnel, within three weeks she set aside specific resources for work to begin. That is power-sharing Government in action at its very best — two Ministers from parties with divergent views working together flexibly, efficiently and speedily for the benefit of those for whom the need is greatest.

I am old enough to remember Belfast in the late 1960s, when I trained as a nurse in Belfast City Hospital close to the Village. The M1 motorway divided long-established communities on the Donegall Road and Broadway with devastating effect. That was compounded by nearly four decades of paramilitarism, which has had an oppressive influence on sound working-class communities such as the Village.

The people of the Village, like everyone else, simply want peaceful, prosperous lives for themselves and their families. They want the paramilitaries off their backs. In that regard, I welcome the news that the UFF so-called Grim Reaper mural at Tavanagh Street is to be painted over. I congratulate bodies, such as the Greater Village Regeneration Trust, who speak for those who want positive change and the many other bodies, such as the Windsor women’s centre, which have been supporting people in the area for many years.

The deprivation indices for Blackstaff ward in the 2001 census were some of the worst in Northern Ireland and showed that the ward lagged far behind anywhere in South Belfast and beyond. The test of this welcome package will be the deprivation indices for 2011. I am confident that when those indices are compiled, even though I will not be in the Assembly, they will be a true measure of the Village’s transformation.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

First, I thank Mr Jimmy Spratt for giving the House the opportunity to discuss the housing needs of the Village. I am very pleased to set out the position in relation to that area, but I also wish to thank the other Members from South Belfast. In fact, it has been an interesting debate, to which all six MLAs for the constituency contributed. No doubt that shows their interest and their in-depth concern for the area.

Let me say at the outset that the Village issue was one of the first challenges to arrive on my desk. I said then, as I still say, that housing is my number-one priority. I was determined to go and see the issues for myself. I walked the area with local representatives, namely the Member of Parliament, Dr Alasdair McDonnell, and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and MLA for South Belfast, Michael McGimpsey. We met a group of residents, including, amongst others, Tommy Morrow, Bob Stoker and Paula Bradshaw from the Greater Village Regeneration Trust and Billy Dixon from the Blackstaff Community Development Association. Therefore, I became very familiar with the problems and issues and with the different opinions on how the problems should be addressed.

I said that if I could find the resources, I would do my best to help. Many Members will be familiar by now with the background to this issue, given the publicity that it has achieved. However, I want to be sure that everybody has the facts — the Village is a large, generally

residential area, containing more than 1,300 homes and almost 50 commercial or social premises; some 4,400 people live there. Most of the dwellings were constructed in the early 1900s and are high-density terraced housing, mostly two-up two-downs, as well as some, more modern, three-bedroom terraced houses, and some larger three-storey terraced houses.

The structural housing problems are, therefore, mainly associated with age and the related lack of modern, or even basic, facilities in some of the houses — although not as many as may sometimes have been portrayed in the media. I have seen those at first hand. Population and demographic trends compound the problem. There has been a distinct movement of families away from the Village and an influx of individuals and single-parent families. Demand and supply of housing are consistent, but single households make up 60% of the waiting list for social housing, while family households constitute just 20%.

However, it was clear that the community was determined to make the best of the situation, and I commend it for its efforts and all its work to highlight the situation. Several physical regeneration projects have already been implemented: the development of sites at the former Disabled Care Centre, the former Co-Op site on the Donegall Road, and the site at Rydalmere Street. There is a very strong community spirit in the Village, and my Department continues to support the community in its endeavours. Only this morning, on my instruction, my departmental officials met the residents and the Greater Village Regeneration Trust for a long, in-depth meeting that lasted nearly three hours to deal with the specifics.

Some 440 residential properties in the Village are deemed unfit, and a further 400 are considered to be in disrepair. All unfit and in disrepair property is privately owned. When I visited the area, I saw for myself just how poor some of the accommodation was, and I was determined to do something about it. It is against this background that we have been trying to formulate a new housing strategy to deal with the problems of the Village. For a significant time, officials from my Department and the Housing Executive have been in close contact with community groups, residents, and political representatives from the Village.

Surveys of the housing conditions and of local opinion have been carried out to determine the best way forward, while trying as far as possible to protect the Village's inherent sense of community. We arranged a Village planning day and have held subsequent meetings — the latest was this morning — to bring together the differing shades of opinion and to provide an opportunity for all to voice their concerns. There is complete agreement on at least one issue: we must address the worst housing conditions first and as quickly as possible. In the short term, we have been

taking steps to address the immediate needs of those vulnerable people in greatest need; for example, the Housing Executive has promoted the use of grant aid for improvements to housing in the private sector. In addition, re-housing has been offered where necessary and feasible. Our warm homes scheme will continue to be used to install insulation and to upgrade heating for people who qualify and who wish the work to be done.

In the long term, we will continue to work with the community and its representatives to optimise housing and regeneration opportunities. Innovative private-sector contributions must also play a part in the Village regeneration proposals. A major urban regeneration plan to transform the Village has been in preparation for some time now. However, I acknowledge that there have been repeated delays during direct rule and a growing frustration among Village residents and their representatives. Mostly, people just wanted to see some movement — a start to the process. In my statement to the Assembly two weeks ago, I made that start, because I am determined to assure every resident and every public representative for South Belfast that I want my announcement translated into action.

The initial vesting will be authorised by the end of this month, with the area being declared an urban renewal area. That will kick-start the full redevelopment process and trigger an investment of around £100 million for the area. That money still has to be earmarked, but it is likely that the vesting process will not be completed for another two years.

The £7 million investment that I announced recently represents the beginning of a long-term project that will lead to the revitalisation of the area and, hopefully, of the community itself. As we all know, the area is very close both to the city centre and to M1 access. The Village should be a desirable place to live, and I want to do my bit to make it so. Nothing has happened for years, and now I, along with my officials, have got matters moving. I do not underestimate the operational difficulties that will arise as a result of the redevelopment. The key point is that the wait is over: work is now starting.

Members raised various issues, with which I will try to deal now. However, if time constraints do not allow me to do so, I will write to the Members concerned.

Jimmy Spratt raised the issue of community involvement. I assure him that the community will be totally involved. Immediately following the declaration of the area as an urban renewal area, a representative from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive will visit each home to assess residents' needs.

The question of which streets will be affected by the urban renewal was also raised. The streets being considered are in the area that is bounded by Donegall Road, Glenmachan Street, Tates Avenue, Donegall Avenue, and the railway line. The area around Monarch

Street, Monarch Parade and Lower Rockview Street to the north side of the Donegall Road is also included.

A further meeting was held this morning with Village residents and the Greater Village Regeneration Trust to discuss what will be done with the £7 million. Various things will happen immediately after the declaration of the urban renewal area.

Alasdair McDonnell asked what I am currently doing to alleviate the plight of the people in the area. We are continuing to promote grant aid for improvements to private-sector housing; where practical, we will rehouse those who want to be rehoused; and we are promoting the installation of energy-efficient heating under the warm homes plus scheme.

Other issues were raised regarding certain people who live in the Village area. I have taken those points on board and will discuss them with the Members who raised them. Anna Lo asked what compensation will be available to owners whose homes are acquired. As well as the market value of the property, owners are entitled to a home-loss payment, which is 10% of the market value of the property, and to a disturbance payment, which is negotiable. In answer to Alex Maskey's question, the urban renewal area will be established after the Housing Executive board has made its declaration.

I assure the people of the Village, Mr Spratt, the representatives of South Belfast, and the Members who contributed to the debate, that I am determined to translate my statement into action.

Adjourned at 4.43 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 11 March 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you rule on the issue of statements being made by Ministers to the House, particularly in regard to notification to Members? I am aware of the Standing Order that states that the Speaker must be given two and a half hours' notice before a statement is made. I understand that Members should have a copy of the statement before it is made by the relevant Minister. I came into the Chamber at 10.29 am, and the Education Minister's statement was not in Members' pigeonholes, the Business Office or the Rotunda. It makes it extremely difficult for Members to have a detailed analysis of what will be said if they are left in the dark.

Mr Speaker: There have been occasions when Ministers, for various reasons, have been unable to make statements available by the time they are ready to speak. Ministers do not have to make statements available as soon as they stand up to speak. However, statements should be made available to Members as soon as possible. It is up to the Minister to say why this statement was not available.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Discovery of Official Documents at Camlough

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Education that she wishes to make a statement regarding the discovery of official documents near a council amenities facility at Camlough.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I apologise to Members: the statement is on its way. I was making some last-minute changes to it, and I understand that it is either outside or is being photocopied as I speak. I thank the Speaker for giving me the time to make my statement.

With permission, I wish to advise the Assembly of the circumstances surrounding the discovery of official documents near a Newry and Mourne District Council amenities facility at Camlough and of the subsequent action taken by the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) and the PSNI to investigate the matter.

The PSNI investigation identified that the documents originated from the former residence of a past employee of the board's education welfare service in Camlough.

The welfare officer concerned left the Southern Board in 1989. At that time, it was customary for welfare officers to work from home, but officers leaving the service were expected to return all files and documentation to the senior education welfare officer for the area. That clearly did not happen in this case.

Tharla sé seo mar thoradh ar ghlanadh áiléir a bhí á dhéanamh ag an duine a chónaíonn ansin anois. Bhí na cáipéisí seo a n-aistriú go suíomh áiseanna Chamlocha, nach bhfuil ach achar goirid ar shiúil.

The incident occurred after the current resident of the property cleared the attic. The documents in question were being transported to the Camlough amenities site, which is a short distance from the property. When the documents were returned to the board, the chief education welfare officer reviewed them and confirmed that they were the working papers of a former education welfare officer in Camlough. They related to the period 1965-1974 and recorded education welfare issues associated with pupils who attended several schools in the area at the time. It was clearly unacceptable that sensitive material of that kind remained in the possession of an individual who had left the service many years previously and that it had been stored in a private dwelling. The chief education welfare officer subsequently contacted previous members of the welfare service to confirm that they no longer held any board documentation.

I am concerned that the public representatives who are involved have confirmed to the chief executive of the Southern Education and Library Board that they had facilitated the media in photographing some of those documents. I assure the Assembly and the wider public that all the papers that were returned to the board have been destroyed securely in accordance with the board's disposal of records schedule; however, concerns still remain about where the files were sent. We are currently working to establish the number of files that were copied, with an aim to ensuring that they are all destroyed. I have instructed the permanent secretary of my Department to write to the media outlets to which those files were sent.

Lena chois sin, léirigh an fiosrú nach féidir an tarlú seo a chur i leith duine ar bith de fhoireann reatha Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Deiscirt, ná níor sáraíodh na nósanna imeachta reatha ar stóráil agus diúscairt cáipéisí den chineál seo.

The investigation has shown that the incident is not attributable to any of the current staff of the Southern Education and Library Board and that there has been no breach of the current procedures for the storage and disposal of documents of this kind. The Southern Education and Library Board has made strenuous efforts to trace individuals who were named in those papers; however, so far they have been able to trace only one. The board wrote to that person last week to explain what had happened and to advise them that all the documents have been recovered and destroyed securely. The letter also expressed the board's regret for any distress that may have been caused.

To observe confidentiality, the board was able to use only the services for which it has responsibility. It made use of its education and welfare service, along with the electoral register and telephone book records. Under current procedures, such incidents simply should not happen; nevertheless, I have written to other education and library boards — and other main education bodies — stressing the importance of ensuring that they comply with data protection rules and of making sure that no other similar material has been retained inappropriately. I have also stressed to them that this is a serious matter, and I am anxious to ensure that they take the necessary steps immediately to guard against any possible recurrence. I have instructed that they therefore carry out a thorough check to ensure that all official documents are held securely and that they are disposed of properly in accordance with agreed disposal schedules. They have been asked to provide written assurance to the Department of Education (DE) by 28 March 2008 that those checks have been carried out.

Tá na cáipéisí seo laistigh de raon an Achta um Chosaint Sonraí, agus mar phríomhchuid de sin níor cheart taifid a choinneáil ar feadh tréimhse níos faide

ná an tréimhse lena mbaineann siad go nádúrtha. Mar sin de, ba cheart na cáipéisí seo a lot go sábháilte roinnt mhaith blianta ó shin.

The documents in question fall within the ambit of the Data Protection Act 1998, a key principle of which is that records should not be held beyond the period of their natural relevance. As such, those documents should have been disposed of securely many years ago.

Confidentiality considerations are also relevant in circumstances where an individual — by whatever means — comes into possession of official documents of a sensitive or personal nature.

The material should be returned immediately to the relevant authority and not transmitted or copied to third parties. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for making a statement to the House. She referred to:

“the board's disposal of records schedule.”

Will she confirm that all education and library boards have such a schedule?

In the Minister's first statement to the House on this matter, she said:

“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.”
— [*Official Report, Bound Volume 27, p411, col 1*].

Will the Minister detail the findings of that audit? What steps have been taken to implement solutions to any identified difficulties to ensure that a similar problem will not occur in another board area?

Ms Ruane: I have been informed that all the boards have schedules.

In addition to the public bodies, the SELB is carrying out a detailed review of its arrangements for the security of data. A contractor has been instructed to install a wire frame with three access doors at the basement storage area of headquarters, where contractors will also install door access systems and fireproof locks at both entrances. On completion of that work, fobs will be issued to staff who require access to the basement storage area. Each head of Department has been asked to detail where files are stored, confirm an adequate security level and verify compliance with the disposal of records schedule.

Tenders will be issued for security software to encrypt all desktops, laptops and mobile phones. Purchase orders will be issued for software to prohibit access to any external devices that are not secured by an approved level of encryption. Software will be purchased to monitor and audit staff acceptance of organisational policies, including acceptable usage and record management policies. Further software will be purchased to facilitate the extension of online training

courses for staff on data protection, freedom of information and information security.

Furthermore, the chief education welfare officer is working with human resources and colleagues in the education welfare service to draw up a list of former colleagues. They will be contacted to ensure that they do not possess any documentation on the service. A former chief education welfare officer stated that the practice in the 1980s was that, on leaving service, officers gave all files and documentation to the senior education welfare officer for the area. Staff from the education welfare service are visiting former offices to confirm that no documentation was left behind when staff were relocated.

The chief education welfare officer is drawing up details of the location and security of all education welfare files to ensure that all are stored in a secure environment. When the SELB's information management officer contacted the Office of the Information Commissioner, he was advised that it was important for the board to recover all the documentation that was found at Camlough, including photographs and any other electronic copies or photographs of the documents.

The Public Record Office in the North has requested that it be advised of the investigation's findings, as the records concerned come under the Public Records Act 1923. I share Mr Storey's concern; there must be no recurrence of such an incident. It is essential that all boards follow the relevant procedures, and I have instructed my permanent secretary to write to them to that effect.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the action of certain elected representatives in dealing with the discovery of the papers was, to say the least, insensitive and irresponsible, particularly as one is a former teacher and should have known better? The people and families involved have contacted me, and the incident has caused them great stress. Go raibh maith agat.

10.45 am

Ms Ruane: As elected representatives, we must observe the highest standards. This is a sensitive issue, and some families are very concerned about it. My Department has done — and will continue to do — everything that it can to ensure that the difficulties for the families that are involved are minimised.

In my previous statement on the matter, I expressed concern that, although the documents were found on a Thursday or Friday, they were not handed over to the board until the following Monday morning and afternoon. It is inappropriate for public documents such as those to have been in the hands of certain individuals for so long.

I accept that the ultimate responsibility lies with the boards and that those documents should not have been

found in that way. Nevertheless, some elected representatives have questions to answer about their role in the matter. I understand that an investigation about various aspects of the issue is ongoing, so I will not pre-empt that. I also expressed concerns that some documents were passed to the media, but I have nothing further to add on that matter.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the Minister's statement. The incident caused considerable alarm and distress in the Camlough area. It also gave rise to what might be called a political skirmish; indeed, one that continues to rattle.

Will the Minister confirm whether, as a result of the incident, any new procedures have been implemented? Such new procedures should have particular regard to how officers in area library boards, or in the Department, treat the information with which they have been dealing once they leave their employment. Is the Minister satisfied that all current and former staff are aware of their responsibilities in the handling of sensitive information? Finally, can the Minister confirm whether the PSNI investigations on the matter have been concluded?

Ms Ruane: As the Member said, the episode has caused distress, and I apologise to the individuals who are involved. We will ensure that we retain the utmost confidentiality in our handling of those sorts of documents, particularly those of such sensitivity.

In my response to Mervyn Storey, I outlined the new procedures that are in place, and I explained the actions that we are taking. As the Member will know, all public bodies across all Departments are examining the way in which they store data.

The Department takes this issue seriously. Everyone who works in the Department is aware of the distress that has been caused, and they are aware of the seriousness of the matter and of the impact that such incidents can have on families. I have had regular discussions with the Department's permanent secretary, and we are ensuring that every member of staff is aware of procedures. Robust measures on the storage and disposal of files are being implemented. The Member also knows that we work with our colleagues in the health authorities on the appropriate sharing of certain files.

The PSNI investigated the matter. After being informed of the incident on Monday 18 February, it commenced an investigation and confirmed to the internal audit officers of the boards that no further documents had been identified. The PSNI prepared a report, and, as far as I know, as regards the remit of the education and library boards, it has completed its investigation.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Although it may not suit public bodies to

be held to account in this way, this matter is clearly in the public interest. The public has a right to know how confidential files are stored, or indeed, neglected. Public representatives like me have a duty to inform the public while maintaining confidentiality, which is precisely what I did.

Is the Minister aware that email correspondence that is pertinent to a case that is being pursued by a former staff member against an education and library board mysteriously went missing and was not available when the staff member requested it, thus warranting the employment of an IT expert, at the behest of the industrial court, to help recover the said correspondence? Does the Minister agree with me that the incident demonstrates the need for an independent review of storage and security of information across all of the education and library boards?

Ms Ruane: I accept that it is in the public interest for such matters to be made known. Where I differ from the Member is on the way in which the matter was made public. It is important that elected representatives and people in a position to deal with sensitive issues always do so appropriately. That was a sensitive issue and had a huge effect on people who were going through difficulties at key moments in their lives. There are more appropriate ways to put information in the public domain. For example, it should have been given to the education and library board much sooner and should not have been given to media outlets to photograph. That was totally inappropriate. I trust that the Member accepts that. If it were ever to happen again, I trust that documents would not be put in the public domain in the same way.

With regard to the case that the Member mentioned, I am not aware that emails have gone missing mysteriously. I do not want to comment on a matter of which I am not aware. It is more important that the Assembly deal with the matter in hand and the statement that I have made on the files. I believe that I answered the Member's question on a review of storage when I responded to Mervyn Storey and Danny Kennedy. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Lo: On several occasions during my previous employment as a social worker, I liaised with education welfare officers whose main remit was to deal with non-attendance at school. Often, their reports are highly confidential, because they involve families' backgrounds, financial situations, marital status, relationships and so on. It is incredible that such confidential files were not identified as missing by the board for such a long time. Can the Minister assure the House that there are systems and structures in place to keep a check on the whereabouts of such files at all times?

Ms Ruane: I absolutely accept and agree with the Member's comments. It is unacceptable that the

situation has happened. I apologise again to the families who have suffered. The Department is putting in place robust systems for checks and balances in relation to files. The Member will be aware from her previous work that appropriate sharing of files takes place between Departments when necessary. It is essential that the Health Department and the Education Department work together. My Department is striving to put in place the most robust system possible.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for her statement. How long are these types of documents generally held, either on computer or hard copy, before they are destroyed? Is it still common practice for some employees to take home sensitive documents? When did the individual concerned cease to be a board employee? Does he or she have any criminal convictions?

Ms Ruane: With regard to the Member's first question, I have been informed that files should be kept for 25 years. They may be kept for a longer period in certain cases. I can send the Member written details of that.

In some cases, education welfare officers work on files at home, but procedures are in place whereby the files must be stored and disposed of. I ask the Member to repeat his third question.

Mr Ross: When did the individual concerned cease to be a member or employee of the board? Does that individual have any criminal convictions?

Ms Ruane: I am not aware of whether the individual has any criminal convictions. I want to be careful about what I say, so I will send the Member the appropriate information in response to his question.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The issue rests on responsibility. The individual charged with the responsibility of looking after the files containing personal details of children and their families failed in that responsibility. Those elected representatives who obtained the files failed in their responsibilities. I agree with Mr Dominic Bradley that any elected representative would have brought the matter to media and public attention — and rightly so — but how that is done is important. It is irresponsible of any elected representative to fax the most personal details of neighbours and constituents to media organisations —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member ask a question, please?

Mr O'Dowd: I will come to the question. Although I respect the freedom of the press, has any of those media organisations agreed to return the documents to the board? I acknowledge that the Minister has apologised three times today for the actions of the board, and perhaps it would be helpful if those elected

representatives who distributed the documents also apologised for their actions.

Ms Ruane: The chief executive of the board or the internal audit team — I am not sure which — has written to the media outlets to request the return of the faxed and photographed documents. I instructed my permanent secretary to write to the media because I take my responsibility seriously, and it is important that the media respect the sensitivity of those documents and return them.

Mr McCausland: I have personal experience of information about a family member being copied from records in further education. Therefore, I understand the distress caused in this case. The difference in my own case was that the information turned up on a computer disk in the possession of Sinn Féin.

The Minister mentioned that “a number of schools” were affected. Can she give a specific number? To which sectors do those schools belong? Are there still occasions when documents are removed from education and library board premises, and what is the policy on such situations?

Ms Ruane: A couple of different schools were involved, and I do not want to say any more. I will send the Member a letter with the appropriate information. Perhaps the Member will repeat his second question?

Mr McCausland: Are there still occasions when documents are removed from education and library board premises and what is the policy on such situations?

Ms Ruane: Sometimes documents are taken off the premises to share information with the appropriate health authorities, and the boards’ clear policies on that state that those documents must be returned to a senior welfare officer.

Mr Speaker: I want to inform Members that copies of the Minister’s statement are now available outside the House.

Mr B McCrea: I note the Minister’s apology, and I thank her for it: it is welcome and appreciated. No system is fail-safe. I am sure that this will not be the last incident of data falling into inappropriate hands, and rather than hang people out to dry it is important that the Assembly establish protocols to ensure that lessons are learned.

11.00 am

The issue of electronic communication is more pertinent now than in the past. It concerns me that most emails are not encrypted. People think that an email goes from A to B, but it does not. It goes all round the world and can be “sniffed” — which is the technical term. What is the Department of Education’s email policy? Are emails routinely disposed of after a certain

period of time? Are emails that are sent between the various agencies encrypted?

Ms Ruane: I agree with the Member that no system is fail-safe. We have to try to implement the most robust procedures to ensure that the system is as safe as possible. If any good can come from this episode, it will be that more robust procedures will be put in place. It is important for us and the boards to learn lessons from what happened, and to work together in best practice in the future.

The Member will know that I am not an expert on encryption. We have asked for details of where files are stored and to be given a guarantee that security levels are adequate. Tenders have been invited for security software to encrypt all desktops, which also includes emails, laptops and mobile phones. Purchase orders have been issued for software that prohibits access to external devices that are not secured by the approved level of encryption. Software to monitor and audit staff acceptance of organisational policies, including acceptable usage and record management policies, will also be purchased. Furthermore, software will be purchased for the extension of online staff training courses in data protection, freedom of information and information security.

Mrs M Bradley: In light of the further revelations in the Chamber today about the SELB’s mishandling of information, does the Minister have confidence in its investigation into the loss of files at Camlough?

Ms Ruane: I feel that I have answered that question; no system is fail-safe and we must try to put robust procedures in place. I want to put it on record that the SELB has conducted a thorough investigation, and follow-up actions will be taken. It is key for all the boards to share practices when handling sensitive information, and the Department will also take the lead in doing that.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister has appropriately apologised to the families that have been affected by the files’ being lost, and she has acknowledged the critical importance of protecting the confidentiality of the information that is held by the boards. I hope that Mr Dominic Bradley takes the opportunity to apologise for adding to the trauma of those families.

Given that the files are 19 years old, will the Minister consider issuing a directive for all former board members to be advised of the necessity to check for any documents that they may have in their possession?

The person who had possession of the documents in question probably did not read them, did not revisit them and did not realise their significance. Therefore, perhaps former board members should be alerted to the possibility that they may possess documents that should be safely disposed of.

Ms Ruane: Absolutely; I will consider that. The SELB has contacted, or is in the process of contacting, all of its former members. It is important that documents with sensitive information be protected.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ruane: No, I will not give way.

As I told the House on 18 February, what caused further distress to many of those affected was the fact that the language used in some of the files would not be used today when talking about such sensitive issues.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for her statement. I notice that this incident came to light when the current residents of a private dwelling were clearing out their attic.

In this case an employee of the Southern Education and Library Board had previously lived in that dwelling. There might be many instances, given the time lag here, whereby people have passed on in the interim and there might be undiscovered documents in the attics of other private dwellings. Is there a method by which the board and the Minister can ensure that there is nothing else lurking in an attic that will later come to light? In addition, having worked for that board for some time, I know the geographical spread of the schools and the board's staff, and I can understand the difficulty that they had at that time. Will the Minister also ensure that those families that have not yet been contacted vis-à-vis the current incident will be contacted and that there will be an urgent pursuit, so to speak, of those individuals so that their minds can be put at rest?

Ms Ruane: I will certainly pass to the board and to my permanent secretary the comments that you made in the first part of your statement. Concerning geographical spread: I do not want to be naming the schools affected because that would further compound the issue. However, the board is doing everything it can to identify and contact the families concerned, to offer them support and to inform them about the incident. That is difficult given that people have moved on or have changed their names. The board also has to deal appropriately with sensitive information, and it is difficult to start contacting other bodies to ask whether they are aware of x, y or z. The board will not do that because that would cause further distress to families. Nevertheless, the board is continuing to do everything possible.

Mr Attwood: I share the comments of Mr McCausland because in a previous phase of our history, I had the police at my door advising me that papers that I had sent to British Government Ministers had been stolen, photocopied and used for improper purposes. I, therefore, understand the sensitivity that surrounds papers going missing and the use to which they could be put. I want to correct a matter that is fundamental to this issue and which neither the Minister nor any of her

colleagues seem to want to put on record. When this matter arose, my colleague Mr Bradley behaved completely responsibly —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is not in the position to be correcting. I am really looking for questions on the ministerial statement. I know that questions have many legs but we need to come to the question — *[Laughter.]*

Mr Attwood: I am pleased, Mr Speaker, to comply with that direction. The Minister said:

“I have instructed the permanent secretary of my Department to write to the media outlets to which those files were sent.”

Does the Minister not already know — if from nowhere else but the board — that only one media outlet was contacted by Mr Bradley? Is the Minister not already aware that that media outlet — ‘The Irish News’ — photographed and then blanked out the details of that document, and has already informed the Information Commissioner that those photographs have been destroyed? Under all those circumstances, will the Minister explain to this House and to the wider public why she is creating an improper scare by saying that her permanent secretary is writing:

“to the media outlets to which those files were sent”

when she knows, or should already know, the truth of this matter?

Ms Ruane: I have instructed my permanent secretary to write to the media. I understand that there was another media outlet from which someone was reading and making comments about the files. I did not name the media outlets: the Member did. However, I have asked my permanent secretary to write to any media outlets that did report that matter because I need absolute clarification about what has happened.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mr Bradley used the term confidentiality — it is a pity that he did not employ confidentiality in the way that he dealt with the matter. Is the Minister aware that there is an on-going investigation by Newry and Mourne District Council into the matter and that the bulk of the documentation was removed from a site, which is contrary to council policy? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ruane: I am aware that Newry and Mourne District Council has an ongoing investigation. I await the outcome of that, and I do not want to say anything that might pre-empt its findings.

Mr Dallat: As a former teacher, I fully appreciate the sensitivity of documents of that nature. As a Member of this Assembly, I also claim to have had my name on that famous laptop.

Does the Minister not agree that 19 years is a long time to get those files back into safe custody? In more

recent times, in a paperless world, in which laptops with very sensitive information have gone missing, surely the Minister is not advocating that elected representatives should grant infinite time to cover up the mistakes of the past? Does she not agree that it is entirely appropriate that elected representatives highlight those issues, so that she can put procedures in place to ensure that that type of scandal never happens again?

Ms Ruane: I have already acknowledged that it is unacceptable that the files went missing. I have apologised in respect of my responsibility in the matter. I asked SELB to carry out an investigation, and I am reporting the findings of that investigation to the Assembly. I am taking responsibility because this is a very important issue.

It is appropriate that elected representatives should raise issues of public interest. Where I differ from the Member is in that I believe that the way in which sensitive information is photocopied, faxed and sent to media outlets by elected representatives is unacceptable. Rather than continually digging holes, people should accept where wrongdoing occurs and move forward. In order to deal with those issues, we all need to learn from them and move forward.

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to Mr Storey's earlier point of order, it is my understanding that when a Minister makes a statement to the House, copies of it must be available outside the Assembly or in Members' pigeonholes, as the Minister rises. That is my understanding of what is good practice and precedent. Questions to the Minister concluded at 11.10 am, yet copies of the statement were not available until 30 minutes after the Minister first rose.

I ask you, Mr Speaker, to make a ruling on what is required with regard to ministerial statements, and whether they must be available to Members as a Minister rises to his or her feet.

Mr Speaker: Order. I thank the Member for his point of order. It would certainly be ideal, and good practice, if copies of a ministerial statement were available to Members as soon as the Minister rises to his or her feet to deliver that statement. Unfortunately, on occasion, that does not happen. Perhaps the Member should refer his remarks to the Committee on Procedures. It is up to the Minister in question to explain to the House why the statement has not been made available.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Report on the Inquiry into the Devolution of Policing and Justice Matters

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to three hours for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 15 minutes to propose and 15 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have up to seven minutes.

The Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (Mr Spratt): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee relating to the devolution of policing and justice matters, and agrees that, as required by section 18 of the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, it should be submitted to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, before 27 March 2008, as a report of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Mr Speaker, I also beg your indulgence, and that of Members, as I find myself in a somewhat unusual position today. As you announced in the Chamber last week, I have assumed the role of Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee as successor to my friend the Rt Hon Jeffrey Donaldson the Member for Lagan Valley, who is the newly appointed junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

11.15 am

My appointment came after the Committee had completed its deliberations and ordered that its report be printed, and so some might wonder whether it is appropriate for me to seek to guide Members through the detail of the report. However, such is life in politics, and I have learnt quickly. I have studied the report in great detail, and, although I have yet to chair a meeting of the Committee, I have spoken informally to Committee members and also to my predecessor.

It was immediately apparent to me that the former Chairperson, his Deputy Chairperson and all the members have been diligent in their work. It is very obvious that they have spent considerable time conducting an extensive inquiry into devolution of policing and justice matters. The fact that the report is published in two volumes is some measure of the evidence that the Committee gathered and considered in the course of its work.

We must bear in mind is that this report has been prepared in accordance with the terms of section 18 of the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006. As the report's executive summary acknowledges:

"Making progress on the devolution of policing and justice powers has proved to be deeply emotive, and highly sensitive; it has posed a significant, and often politically difficult, challenge over a considerable period of time."

Members will be aware that the matter was considered previously by the Committee on the Preparation for Government and by the Committee on the Programme for Government in the run up to restoration in May 2007. Following restoration, the Assembly resolved that the task of preparing a report on progress towards the devolution of policing and justice should be a matter for the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

The Committee wasted no time. At its meeting on 12 June 2007, it agreed to conduct a formal inquiry in order to prepare such a report. The six components of the terms of reference for the inquiry can be found on page 8 of the report. I want to deal with each of those components in turn. I also expect that Members will find it helpful if I put the report into context.

In February 2006, the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) published a discussion paper entitled 'Devolving Policing and Justice in Northern Ireland'. It seemed an eminently sensible first step to invite officials from the NIO to brief the Committee, and they did so on 3 July 2007. Those same officials were called upon throughout the course of the inquiry, and they always gave willingly of their time. All the documentation from the NIO, including the discussion paper, can be found at appendix 3 of the report. Those documents form an important part of the Committee's report.

Some 29 organisations made substantive written submissions to the Committee. I urge Members, if they have not already done so, to take time to read those thoughtful and interesting papers. The Committee also took oral evidence from a number of witnesses. There were groundbreaking appearances by the Lord Chief Justice, Sir Brian Kerr; the Chief Constable, Sir Hugh Orde; and the Director of Public Prosecutions, Sir Alasdair Fraser. There were also welcome, and willing, appearances from the Secretary of State, Shaun Woodward; the Chairman of the Policing Board, Sir Desmond Rea; the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, Sir Nigel Hamilton; and the Director of the Northern Ireland Court Service, David Lavery.

Although the four main parties are represented on the Committee, members were quick to acknowledge that other parties in the Assembly should have an opportunity to contribute to the inquiry. The Alliance Party and the Progressive Unionist Party took that opportunity and provided oral evidence to the Committee last autumn.

Professor John Jackson from Queen's University Belfast and P J Fitzpatrick, the Chief Executive of the Courts Service in the Republic of Ireland, also took time to appear before the Committee.

The report deals with the range of policing and justice powers that would cease to be reserved matters

in circumstances where there was a request by the Assembly for devolution.

It addresses issues associated with the model and procedures to fill the ministerial post or posts in a new Department. The report makes specific recommendations on the range of policing and justice powers that would cease to be reserved matters, as well as on further preparations that must be made to facilitate devolution.

The report discusses issues about the structure, relationships, governance and accountability of a new Department with policing and justice powers. It also acknowledges the concerns about the funding for, and timing of, devolution.

The report contains 41 recommendations. Issues 1 and 2 relate to reserved matters, which are dealt with in pages 9 to 15 and are covered by recommendations 1 to 16.

The Committee's first task was to satisfy itself that the reserved matters were wholly, and properly, represented in the Northern Ireland Office discussion paper that was published in February 2006. After that, the Committee turned to the slightly more complex question of which matters might be transferred. From the report, Members will see that there was a substantial level of consensus on the matters that would be included in any request for the transfer of policing and justice powers, if the Assembly made such a request. However, there were issues on which the Committee was unable to reach a consensus.

The Committee recommends that, either before or after the devolution of the range of policing and justice matters that are outlined in the report, the Assembly conducts a review of those matters that relate to the Public Processions (Northern Ireland) Act 1998 and examines the outcome of the strategic review of parading before considering if, and when, the powers should be transferred.

The Committee also recommends that, either before or after the devolution of the range of policing and justice matters that are outlined in the report, those matters that relate to 50:50 temporary recruitment provisions are reviewed to determine if, and when, they should be transferred.

During the Committee's deliberations, diverse opinions were expressed about the transfer of excepted matters. Sinn Féin and the SDLP argued that all excepted matters should be transferred. However, there was no consensus on whether an amendment should be sought to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to allow the Assembly to request the transfer of excepted matters.

Members may find it helpful to refer to annex A of the report on pages 28 to 32, which is a summary of those matters that will — and will not — be devolved. That will only be relevant if the Assembly decides to

make a request for the transfer of policing and justice matters.

Issue 3 is addressed in pages 17 to 25 of the report and specifically relates to the structure, relationships, governance and accountability of a new Department with policing and justice powers. The Committee makes 20 separate recommendations on those matters. I know that some Committee members intend to speak in the debate, and I expect them to elaborate on that section of the report in particular. They are well placed to do that, and I suspect that many of their contributions will recognise one of the most significant challenges that the Committee faced — striking a balance between independence and accountability that would enable the organisations responsible for the administration of policing and justice to operate effectively.

The Committee heard well-argued testimonies from the Lord Chief Justice, the director of the Public Prosecution Service, the director of the Northern Ireland Court Service and from expert witnesses P J Fitzpatrick — the chief executive of the Courts Service of Ireland — and Professor John Jackson from Queen's University Belfast.

The Committee agreed that, although it would not be possible to implement change before devolution, issues relating to independence and accountability should be examined further, as a matter of priority, after devolution. That is stated in recommendation 35.

I will now draw the attention of Members to the other main points in the report.

First, the Committee recommends that there should be a single Department that would exercise powers in relation to policing and justice matters. The Committee also considered a range of ministerial options, for which the NIO has already made legislative provision, but was unable to achieve consensus on any of them. The Committee noted that it would also be open to the Assembly to develop other options for ministerial posts and appointment procedures, which, if approved by the Assembly, would require a change in legislation.

During their contributions to this debate, parties may rehearse their preferences for particular ministerial models. The Committee makes two particularly important recommendations about the way in which political parties should commit to further discussions. First, parties should consider the ministerial model that is to be adopted and the method by which the Assembly would make the ministerial appointment or appointments. Secondly, they should consider how any new Department that would exercise responsibility for policing and justice powers might be accommodated in the Executive. The Committee makes it clear that it will be necessary for those discussions to take place before policing and justice matters are devolved.

The report also contains a number of recommendations about the appointment and role of an Attorney General for Northern Ireland. The Committee acknowledge that the creation of that post is a matter for the First Minister and deputy First Minister and raised the matter with OFMDFM. The Committee was advised that no preparatory work had been done for the purposes of appointing an Attorney General. Indeed, it was told that the matter was one for political resolution. In light of that information, the Committee recommends that preparations for the appointment of an Attorney General for Northern Ireland should be taken forward by the First Minister and deputy First Minister before the devolution of policing and justice.

The Committee also identifies a number of governance issues associated with the post of Attorney General and welcomes the advice from the NIO, in its letter of 14 February 2008, that the Attorney General would be answerable to the Assembly on matters of prosecution policy.

The Committee largely endorses the proposals from the NIO about the transfer of the range of existing policing and justice organisations on a without-prejudice basis. However, the Committee makes specific recommendations about the need to review or examine particular issues relating to the governance and accountability of organisations such as the Probation Board, the Court Service and the Public Prosecution Service, including which Department the Public Prosecution Service might be attached to. Recommendations 28, 29 and 30 relate specifically to appointments to the Policing Board and the Office of the Police Ombudsman.

The Committee also discussed the arrangements that would be required to ensure that current North/South agreements should remain in place at the point of devolution. The Committee agreed that the NIO, in consultation with OFMDFM, should take steps to ensure that relevant protocols are in place at the point of devolution. The Committee also agreed that, following devolution, a review of policing and justice agreements should be carried out by the new Department in consultation with its Statutory Committee. Both matters are addressed by recommendation 38.

Before turning to issue 4 in the report, it would be remiss of me not to refer to the considerable amount of time that the Committee spent discussing the role of the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) and the security services. Those organisations are involved in issues of national security, which are excepted matters. Recommendation 39 refers to them.

Issue 4 relates specifically to the preparations that have been made, and still need to be made, to facilitate the devolution of policing and justice matters. The evidence provided by the NIO, the Office of the First

Minister and deputy First Minister and the range of organisations involved in policing and justice matters made it clear to the Committee that all the necessary administrative arrangements had been made, or could be made, in time to respond to any request for devolution of policing and justice.

On various occasions, the Committee discussed funding for policing and justice. The Committee is concerned that, following devolution of those powers, any potential pressures on the policing and justice budget might ultimately have to be borne by the Northern Ireland block.

11.30 am

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

Mr Spratt: Issue 5 of the report deals with the lack of consensus in the Committee about the timing of the devolution of policing and justice matters. The report's final recommendation states that the political parties should commit to further talks on the devolution of policing and justice.

I commend the report and the motion to the Assembly, and I look forward to a constructive and focused debate.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Alex Maskey to speak, I remind the House that as this is a three-hour debate, Members have up to seven minutes to speak.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Just over a year ago, my Sinn Féin colleagues and I made the historic decision to engage with policing structures in the North. We did so to ensure that the PSNI would become the type of accountable, civic policing service that is required by the Good Friday Agreement. Part of the basis for that decision was the clear commitments that were set out by the two Governments and signed off by all parties at, or following, the St Andrews Agreement and the talks that went on at that time. The key element of those discussions is the transfer of policing and justice powers.

Since that decision was made, Sinn Féin members have taken their places on the Policing Board and have worked well with the other members and parties on those boards, including members of the DUP. Many of my council colleagues have taken leadership roles on local district policing partnerships (DPPs). Other republicans have come forward to serve as independent members on DPPs, and ordinary citizens in republican communities have, for the first time, attended public sessions of DPP meetings. Together we are challenging bad policing — when we see it — and working to put it right.

We are working with the PSNI to develop an effective, civic policing service that will tackle crime and make our communities safer, and we are making a

positive difference. I recognise that that is a big challenge for society, including republicans, and it is also a huge challenge for the PSNI.

The next necessary component in the overall policing plan must be the transfer of responsibility for policing and justice into the hands of locally elected politicians. That is not merely an abstract notion; democratic accountability must be the cornerstone of acceptable institutions, especially the political institutions and the policing and criminal justice system, including the judiciary. It is about delivery for those communities and individuals who engage daily with the policing or criminal justice system.

I am sure that every MLA has had such people in their offices giving positive and negative feedback on their experiences. Whatever the constituent's experience, each Member is powerless to effect any further significant change in this area of important work. Surely no MLA wants that situation to continue. MLAs should want the maximum transfer of powers, and only then will we be able to have a positive impact on people's lives.

The transfer of policing and justice powers is a sensible demand. Every community, group and individual who has an interest in delivering an accountable and effective policing service in the North supports the transfer of those powers. Any unionist opposition to the transfer of policing and justice powers is not based on a desire for better policing; it is based merely on narrow political and internal interests. It seems that the demands of the people — nationalists, unionists and others — who want the transfer of powers are secondary to whatever machinations are going on in political unionism. That is unacceptable and must not be allowed to happen. It is time for unionism to deliver on the St Andrews Agreement, and, crucially, it is time for both Governments to hold firm to their commitments.

Sinn Féin supports both the report and the motion. It is critical that the DUP accepts the challenge that is laid down in the report. It is in the hands of the DUP — more so than any other party — to sit down with the other parties to agree the precise details of the transfer of powers, which should happen by May. For a long time, we have listened to the DUP telling its community and the rest of us that it is the new party of unionism and that it can offer confident leadership. It is time for the DUP to demonstrate that leadership and positive responsibility, which, over the past number of days, has been sadly lacking.

I support the motion and the report in so far as it puts responsibility on the shoulders of the parties — and firmly on the shoulders of the DUP to show the positive leadership that it has been promising for so long — to ensure that the people here can influence

policing and justice matters through their locally elected representatives. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McFarland: I start by paying tribute to the outgoing Chairperson, members, and staff of the Assembly Executive Review Committee, and to those who gave evidence. It has been a long haul. Moreover, I pay tribute to those Members who have managed to read the report.

The issue is a child of the St Andrews Agreement and the result of some sort of deal — although everyone now denies it — between the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin that policing and justice will be devolved. The report specified a date in May.

We must remember that a lot of effort went into this. Colleagues sat on the Preparation for Government Committee all through the summer of 2006, and that effort continued in the autumn in the Programme for Government Committee. Therefore, the report has taken a long time to arrive, and we have had plenty of opportunity to talk about it. As can be seen from the weight of evidence, a lot of talking has been done.

The problem divides into three. The first group of issues is political: they remain unresolved and are parked for the political parties to discuss. Secondly, there are reserved matters, which were with Westminster and are now being transferred. In general, they are uncontroversial, and the Committee has agreed to the transfer, without a problem, of the vast bulk of those. Thirdly, there are excepted matters; essentially, those relate to national security. They are to remain the responsibility of Westminster, because they involve the United Kingdom. There was a hoo-ha between the SDLP and Sinn Féin, who wanted all of those transferred. Members can imagine the confusion over anti-terrorist legislation on the Floor of the House — it does not bear thinking about. Luckily, those issues are still parked over there.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the benefits of such legislation. Are we against having police and justice powers devolved? Probably not. I have strong views that there should be legislation to stop people attacking the elderly. If someone enters the home of an elderly person and beats him or her up, that person's feet should not touch the ground before going to jail via the courts. There is a need for proper penalties for people who attack the elderly. I am concerned about young people who go out socially carrying six-inch bowie knives. Knife legislation must be improved. Antisocial behaviour is frequently referred to in the House, and stronger measures are needed in respect of that. I would like to see that anyone who squares up to a police officer, a firefighter or a member of healthcare staff is dealt with promptly by the police and rigorously by the courts.

Currently, we do not have control of those matters; however, it would make sense if we did, because they are better dealt with in this House.

We should not forget that my party's forefathers brought down regional Government because Westminster refused to give us back policing and justice. It is ironic that we now have difficulties in agreeing its transfer.

Why are there difficulties? Timing is the first factor: it is a political issue. When will the time be right for devolution and what issues are involved? Let us consider them. The main difficulty is the stance of Sinn Féin. That party sits with the Democratic Unionist Party on the Policing Board. It is already involved in policing, and that arrangement seems not to be going too badly.

Notwithstanding, is it right that, at this stage, former senior members of the Provisional IRA should be in charge of policing? Is the country ready for that — particularly when the army council still exists and there is substantial doubt over its intentions? A police report on the murder of Mr Quinn and the shenanigans in South Armagh, to be published shortly, may not reflect well on the Provisional movement. There are issues there that are not clear and the result is that — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Members should check that their mobile phones are switched off.

Mr McFarland: — sufficient confidence does not yet exist for that to happen.

The Chief Constable and the Secretary of State appeared in front of the Committee; both ventured that the autumn was the right time for devolution of policing and justice.

Is there some secret deal between the hierarchies of Sinn Féin and the DUP, à la St Andrews? Before the St Andrews Agreement, the DUP maintained that Sinn Féin was not fit for Government, and that it would be a lifetime, or five lifetimes, before they would be fit.

However, in the end, they missed the date, but produced a timetable. The question for those parties now — and I know that they have not told their grass roots — is whether we are going to miss the current target date, but have a plan in place.

Members must consider several political issues that arose in the Committee. The Ulster Unionist Party considers that if there is confidence in the devolution of policing and justice powers, there should be one Minister, as is the case with all other Departments. Members would be confident that that Minister would do his or her duty. However, the nationalist parties, Sinn Féin and the SDLP, are pushing for two Ministers. Such an arrangement would create issues about the doubling up on staff and the £70,000 per annum ministerial salary.

Another issue involves the number of Northern Ireland Departments. There are two scenarios: first; one Department could be abolished — therefore an existing Minister would cease to hold that position — and a policing and justice ministerial post could be created; secondly, and perhaps more likely, Westminster could legislate by Order in Council to create an extra Department. Alternatively, as was suggested strongly in the Committee, another cosy little deal could be done. Why, early in the life of this Assembly, did the two junior Ministers suddenly apply for and get, such was their workload, loads of extra staff? Could it be that the plan is to devolve policing and justice powers to OFMDFM?

Careful consideration must be given to accountability in relation to the Assembly's interaction with the Court Service and the Policing Board.

Finally —

Mr Simpson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McFarland: My colleague will deal with the Member later.

There is an issue about the finances of dealing with the past, and, in order that we are not short-changed in the budget transfer, that matter must be properly thought through.

Mr A Maginness: Given that lunchtime is approaching; where is the beef in the report? Although it is wordy — 41 recommendations contained in two fairly substantial documents — where is the beef in it? There is no doubt that good work has been done on the mechanics of transfers, and those matters have been well rehearsed and addressed; however, essentially, there is no political agreement about one of the most fundamental issues facing the Assembly — that we should have power over policing and justice matters.

The hallmark of real Government is to have control of law and order. I listened carefully to Mr McFarland said about his political predecessors, and I have read Brian Faulkner's autobiography, in which he refers to the fact that when the Heath Government indicated that they were about to remove policing and justice powers from the Northern Ireland Government he felt that that diminished the sense of Government and that no Government could be credible if they did not control law and order. He was right. That is not to say that the Heath Government were not right to remove those powers; however, a consequence of that was that the Northern Ireland Government resigned and devolution here ended for many years.

Such powers are at the heart of Government, and the SDLP believes that if we can share power on social and economic matters, administer a Budget of £15 billion per annum and deal with — and share — such extensive responsibilities among four parties, then,

surely, we could do the same with policing and justice powers.

11.45 am

Mr Weir: Does the Member not agree that policing and justice have been treated separately throughout any attempts at devolution over the past 35 years? They were not included in the 1973-74 Sunningdale settlement. Indeed, of all the various functions that were devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998, policing and justice were excluded. It has been recognised down the years that policing and justice are separate from issues such as health, education and regional development.

Mr A Maginness: I understand the point that Mr Weir makes. We are not saying that policing and justice is not an issue that has to be dealt with sensitively and in a manner that is consistent with the different political aspirations and feelings of people in the House. We are saying that the big risks of power sharing and the acceptance of partnership Government have been taken. In comparison with those, the risk in devolving policing and justice is small beer.

The report says:

“the devolution of policing justice powers has proved to be deeply emotive, and highly sensitive”.

I say to Mr Weir and to other Members that it is time that we left emotions behind. It is time for us to grow up and become mature politicians who deal not with emotional matters, but with the realities of power. The fundamental reality of power is the control of law and order. I know that Mr Weir is not impressed by that argument, but he should reflect long and hard on that. I would have expected him, as a lawyer, to be more accepting of the importance of law and order being part and parcel of the political set-up.

My basic premise is that if we accept power sharing, we must accept it in relation to policing and justice. Furthermore, in essence, if not in law, policing has been partially devolved to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. That has been one of the most sensitive issues throughout all the political discussions that have taken place. If we have that partial devolution, why not go the whole hog and have all those matters devolved?

The SDLP supports the idea of a single justice Department, and it would prefer that there were one Minister. The party would consider other models, but warns against the Balkanisation of such a Department, whereby one Minister looks after justice and another looks after policing. That would be divisive in the Assembly and should be avoided at all costs.

I hope that the House can agree some time soon to the complete transfer of these matters to one single Department and Minister for justice and policing.

Those issues arise every day of the week. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that even though I allowed seven minutes for contributions to the debate, we still have some extra time available. Perhaps I should have said that at the start of the debate.

Mr A Maginness: Thank you, Mr Speaker; I must be doing something right.

Law and order and criminal justice matters appear in the papers every day and are raised at nearly every sitting of this House.

What are we — are we the legislators or administrators of those issues? No, we are not — we are merely spectators. We must stop being spectators and become players on the field.

Dr Farry: I, too, congratulate those who were involved in the preparation of the weighty reports. That said; I am disappointed by their content. I am unsure about whether there has been much progress on policing and justice since the discussions in the Preparation for Government Committee in 2006. At that time, there were three key issues: the powers to be devolved; the ministerial structures; and the timing of devolution. The easiest issue related to the powers to be devolved, as consensus could most readily be found on that matter. Indeed, that issue is the most detailed aspect of the reports.

The remaining issues — ministerial structures and the timing of devolution — are still up in the air. Although the reports refer to those matters as being the subject of further discussions among parties, there is no indication about the forum or format in which those discussions will take place. I, for one, and the wider community, would like those discussions to take place in a transparent way so that people could have a clear understanding of what was happening and to avoid a deal being made behind the scenes.

I put on the record that the Alliance Party does not feel much sense of ownership of the reports. The Assembly and Executive Review Committee is the only Committee comprised entirely of Members from the four Executive parties. I remind the House that it is an Assembly and Executive Review Committee, not an Executive review Committee. There are wider reforms and matters pertaining to how the House conducts itself, and the Committee could benefit from having a different perspective on it.

I am comfortable with the Committee's recommendations regarding the areas to be devolved; they reflect largely the papers that were provided by the NIO in the past and more recently. Although we are ambitious for powers to be transferred to the Northern Ireland Assembly, there is a wider UK dimension to policing, particularly in relation to national security

issues. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that some matters will continue to be excepted matters and will remain the responsibility of Westminster.

The Alliance Party believes that there should be a single Department, but notes the absence of any clear consensus on ministerial structures. Our preference is for one Minister operating in the Executive through collective responsibility, in a coherent manner. Of all the models for which the British Government have legislated thus far, only one party in the House is deemed to be unsuitable for exercising responsibilities on policing — the Alliance Party.

We could have the perverse situation whereby the Alliance Party, if and when it has sufficient numbers to qualify for a place on the Executive — and our day will come, mark my words — we would be entitled to —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: Sorry, no. I have a lot to get through.

Under the d'Hondt process, the Alliance Party would be entitled to take up a ministerial post in any of the existing Departments. However, the British Government have determined that Ministers will come from the two largest designations in the House. Therefore, for the Alliance Party to qualify to exercise policing and justice responsibilities, we would need to be part of one of the two larger designations. That is a farcical situation and points to the fallacy that is the designation system. Again, it is a blatant form of institutionalised discrimination.

The Alliance Party wants policing and justice powers to be passed to the Assembly.

The Assembly should aspire to exercise those powers; indeed, the same goes for some sort of tax-varying powers. This institution is not a glorified county council; it is a devolved Assembly that is working for the region that is Northern Ireland.

For the Alliance Party, the question is not whether, but when, those powers will be devolved. The answer seems to be that they will be devolved soon, but not quite yet. The Northern Ireland Office must be careful not to push too hard or too fast for their devolution, given that there is insufficient community confidence about the matter.

The issue for the Alliance Party is not the bona fides of any party that might exercise policing and justice responsibilities. We have travelled a long way in a short time, although I recognise that some issues still need to be resolved. The key issue for us is the way in which the Executive work together. There are fears that justice powers might be exercised by one party, operating in a ministerial silo and in a biased manner. It is important that justice is embedded in an Executive that operates collectively and coherently and in which Ministers from all parties adopt a genuine problem-

solving approach. We have not seen that in this Assembly up until now.

I wish to draw particular attention to the manner in which the victims' commissioners were handled. That represented a clear challenge for the Executive to show leadership by making a single appointment, as they were required to do. They ducked the issue and tried to split the difference. In life, one has to make tough decisions, but one cannot always split the difference. If the public could see an Executive that are willing to make tough decisions and reach compromises, they would be much more assured of the Executive's ability to exercise authority over policing and justice. Having said that, the Assembly should champion the devolution of policing and justice powers and do what it can to build confidence over the coming months. I therefore hope that that devolution will happen very soon.

Resources pose a key challenge that must be addressed, because major pressures are involved with policing and justice. If the costs for that are transferred to the Northern Ireland block grant, there will be significant financial pressures. That is an issue of particular concern.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McCausland: The report's length demonstrates the complexity of the issues with which it deals. Much of the Committee's debate was about the structure — or architecture — of policing and justice. There was significant agreement on those technical matters, which is reflected in the report and which was explained by the incoming Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Spratt.

The devolution of policing and justice powers is a complex and sensitive issue. That is why most unionists will not be impressed by Alan McFarland's rather pathetic efforts this morning to make spurious accusations and allegations against other unionists. Being savaged by Alan McFarland is a bit like being savaged by a dead sheep.

Most unionists will not be impressed either by that or by David McNarry's inane ramblings.

Devolution is a sensitive issue that deserves to be treated with respect and not in the way in which —

Mr B McCrea: Yes, it is.

Mr McCausland: I am sorry; it is Basil McCrea rambling — the two Members sound much the same.

As I said, there was some agreement on technical matters. However, there are many matters on which much more work must be done.

It has just occurred to me that an attempt is being made to change the Ulster Unionist Party's leadership, because Basil McCrea seems to speak on everything these days.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has acknowledged that no preparatory work has been done on the office of the Attorney General. There were some matters on which several options had been identified but on which there was simply no agreement. The Committee could not even agree on the name of any future Department. We did not agree on the ministerial model, and there was significant concern about financial implications.

I wish to concentrate on the core issue for most unionists, which is sometimes described as community confidence. The onus for that is on Sinn Féin — not on unionists — because that party is holding up the devolution of policing and justice powers. Sinn Féin is the obstacle to this step.

12.00 noon

On a radio programme this morning, Martina Anderson was interviewed by Seamus McKee. On several occasions, she was pressed as to whether the IRA army council should be disbanded, and she refused to answer the question. It was put to her several times, but on each occasion, she refused to answer it. Her silence speaks volumes, because the abolition — the disbandment — of the IRA army council would be a significant step; only one step, but a significant step.

Last week, Jennifer McCann organised — in this very Building — a celebration of an IRA terrorist, a person who placed a bomb in a hotel and attempted to murder members of the RUC and members of the general public. The deputy First Minister stated recently that he had wanted to murder every member of the British Army. Such incidents concern members of the unionist community. Perhaps those incidents serve to steady the nerves of republicans, but they also put back the possible date of the devolution of policing and justice.

The murder of Mr Quinn was mentioned earlier today. There is also the matter of the murder of Mr McCartney, and the fact that the police are still investigating the Northern Bank robbery.

Mrs I Robinson: Does the Member agree that the poll conducted recently by the Northern Ireland Office, indicating that more than 60% of DUP voters support the transfer of policing and justice, is an absolute nonsense and an example of the NIO at its dirty work?

Mr McCausland: I welcome the Member's intervention. I can see that Basil McCrea is laughing, and I know that he finds everything very funny these days, but there are many people in the unionist community who see this as a very serious matter and not deserving of the sort of nonsense emanating from those benches.

Alex Maskey spoke about the attitude of Sinn Féin to policing, and the shift that his party made a year ago. He spoke of unionists delivering. We need to see

Sinn Féin delivering. The words and the actions of Martina Anderson, Jennifer McCann, Martin McGuinness, and others show clearly that Sinn Féin still has a long way to go.

Devolution of policing and justice will not happen in May, nor will it happen in October. The Chief Constable told the Committee that he considered October to be the possible date for devolution. He said that that estimate was based on a conversation with various people; however, he could not tell us on what those people had based their presumption that October would be a suitable date, nor what was going to change between May and October. Devolution will not happen in May or October; it cannot — and will not — happen unless and until the DUP agrees to it. That may be called DUP consent, or a DUP veto, but that is the reality, and I thank God for it.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Committee for its report.

I want to focus on what I believe are the reasons for the DUP's refusal to fulfil its obligations. People at this side of the Chamber will not be lectured by people in unionism. Let us remind ourselves that policing and justice powers were taken away because of the abuse of those powers by unionism. Sin é. Níl aon rud eile ann ach an rud sin.

I listen to Members talking quite sensibly about the need for us to have the ability to introduce legislation to deal with, for example, knife culture, the victims of crime and bail conditions for offenders. Those Members then say that they do not want those powers.

I wonder where ordinary unionists who were listening to Nigel Dodds this morning feel that new competent unionism is at this point.

The DUP says that it won the St Andrews Agreement. The St Andrews Agreement is explicit on the issue: powers of policing and justice should be transferred by a given date in May. Martin McGuinness, in his discussions with the DUP and before the DUP leader, Ian Paisley, and I made the agreement that brought these institutions into being, agreed that the Democratic Unionist Party would be bound by the St Andrews Agreement.

The core of the issue is political. It has nothing to do with Sinn Féin; it is to do with the battle in unionism and, most recently, the Dromore by-election. One of the problems that I find, as an observer and student of unionism and as someone who wants to learn about unionism, is that Jim Allister is as likely to be dictating what the DUP does as anyone on the Benches opposite. Where does new, confident unionism stand now?

Offensive words were used. Whatever one thinks of Mairead Farrell — and I happen to think that she was an iconic Irishwoman — it does not help in any way to

build confidence for anyone to say, as was said yesterday, that she got what was coming to her. It is not a shared hand when people on the Benches opposite talk about community confidence. The old days are finished. The community is all the people who live here. We must remember that all those who died had friends and family. We have all a big job of work to do to build confidence right across all the divisions.

It is obvious that policing and justice powers will be transferred. It is only a question of when. We will have to put up with the bluster, offstage noises and everything else until the DUP eventually gets round to doing what it agreed to do. The quicker it does that, the better for everyone. There is no logic to the DUP's position. Someone should run back the transcripts of the remarks made by any of the unionist spokespersons on the issue. There is no rationale or logic whatsoever in saying that they do not want to share power with unrepentant republicans or with former republican prisoners. That is nonsense. They are sharing power with unrepentant republicans and with former republican prisoners now, both here in these institutions, the Executive and — for what it is worth — on the Policing Board and in the district policing partnerships as well. A lot of power has already been transferred and devolved.

The DUP may succeed in extending that time — who knows? It plays up the phrase “a DUP veto”. Let me remind the DUP that that is a double-edged veto. We read in the papers that the DUP wants to do other things in the process, and I note the totally offensive remarks that it made about Cumann Lúthchleas Gael — the GAA. If the DUP wants to have a soccer stadium — not a football stadium — at the Danny Blanchflower site, it will not get it without Sinn Féin's consent or veto.

Let us work the matter out sensibly, and not across the Chamber in belligerent, offensive tones. Let us sit down and talk the issues through and serve the people. All the people deserve to have decent, proper policing that is accountable and ensures that local Ministers can come forward and express the concerns of all the constituencies of this part of the island of Ireland. Sin é, a Cheann Comhairle. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr I McCrea: I put on record my appreciation to the Committee Clerk, the staff of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and its former Chairman. I welcome the newly appointed Chairman, my friend and colleague Jimmy Spratt.

Although Committee members are in the Chamber to present the report on which powers could, or could not, be devolved, the timing of that devolution was outside the Committee's remit. I will not listen to lectures or threats from Gerry Adams or any Sinn Féin MLA. They complained that the unionist community has entered a power-sharing Executive and has made

statements that are not very nice. I will not be threatened by Gerry Adams about a Sinn Féin veto on a football stadium or any other subject.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sinn Féin will not be threatened by a unionist veto either.

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

Mr I McCrea: That is about to happen.

There has been much Government and party debate about when the final piece of the devolution jigsaw will be put in place. Even the NIO has been busy preparing draft legislation for its chosen date of May 2008. However, I state categorically that the DUP has never signed up to a deadline for the devolution of policing and justice. The DUP will not endorse the deadline set by the British and Irish Governments.

I noticed that the NIO recently took time out from preparing the draft legislation to carry out an opinion poll. Lo and behold, the poll found that, when asked, 60% of DUP voters supported the devolution of policing and justice powers. I was not at all surprised by the result, but I assure the NIO and the Secretary of State that the DUP will not be swayed by any opinion polls, demands or threats.

The DUP is some time away from even considering the devolution of policing and justice, and many outstanding issues remain to be addressed. A triple-lock veto on the devolution of policing and justice is enshrined in legislation because of the negotiating skills of the DUP. The party will continue to exercise that veto until it is happy that sufficient community confidence exists and that the so-called army council has been stood down.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr I McCrea: No, I will not. The army council must be permanently stood down.

The DUP must see a major change in Sinn Féin's attitude. In recent weeks, as my colleague Nelson McCausland mentioned, Martin McGuinness stated that he would have killed "every single British soldier" in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday. Sinn Féin paid a recent tribute to an IRA bomber Mairéad Farrell, and on radio this morning, the Member for Foyle Martina Anderson described herself as an unrepentant republican. As Nelson said, she refused to answer a question on the future of the army council. Such comments alone prove that Sinn Féin has much work to do to create public confidence. It is more likely that Sinn Féin is reaching out to its ever-reducing republican support than trying to deal with the issues at hand.

The DUP has been blamed for stalling the devolution of policing and justice. However, that blame rests with Sinn Féin and the continued existence of the army council. The DUP has never stated that it does not

support the devolution of policing and justice powers. However, as long as attacks on Orange Halls continue and Sinn Féin wages a cultural war on British symbols, I assure the Assembly that there will be little support for the devolution of policing and justice powers from the community that the DUP represents.

Mr B McCrea: It is interesting that Nelson McCausland said that this is not a funny subject — perhaps his statement marks the end of the "Chuckle Brothers".

I remind Nelson McCausland and other Members present that they were the ones who got into bed with Sinn Féin on the issue. They did the deal at St Andrews. It is now for the rest of the Assembly to try to pick up the pieces — *[Laughter.]*

12.15 pm

I hear laughter, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was admonished earlier. However, this is not a laughing matter; it is not funny. Why are Members laughing? — *[Interruption.]*

I am trying my best, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. Let the Member speak.

Mr B McCrea: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The Assembly must identify whether one of the key attributes, confidence, is present. Does the Assembly have confidence in itself and in other people? Does the community have sufficient confidence for policing and justice to be devolved to the Assembly?

As a member of the Policing Board, I have watched how Sinn Féin has operated in that body. I must say that I have seen that party engage seriously in the Policing Board. It tries to do what it believes is right. Of course, the point is that there are fundamental disagreements, which I have discussed. In fact, there have been some significant discussions on matters such as the operational independence of the Chief Constable, which, in my party's view, is sacrosanct, but is a matter for debate. There was discussion on the use of Taser, for which I believed that a proper case had been put forward. However, other members disagreed.

In order to generate the public confidence that is needed for progress to be made, the Assembly must be able to have reasonable, rational debates and reach proper conclusions on those issues. When it is able to do so, and tackle difficult situations, it can move forward.

I have difficulty with the emphasis that is being put on the past, because the Assembly keeps going over old ground and rubbing salt into wounds. It is, therefore, impossible to build the confidence that is necessary to move forward. Having listened to my colleague Mr McFarland, who set out several reasons why my party wants there to be devolution of policing and justice and why it considers that to be important, I believe

that, at present, the problem is that the necessary confidence does not exist.

The funniest suggestion that I have heard so far is one that has been around for quite some time — that the two Ministers for policing and justice would be Ian Paisley Jnr and Gerry Kelly. That would be a different “Chuckie” team. I do not have any particular problem with either individual. However, the community has issues with them. The community is not ready to take those people on board. There is insufficient trust.

What is actually being discussed? I have already said that the operational independence of the Chief Constable is paramount; that has been agreed. The Court Service will be an arm’s-length body. The judiciary is always independent; that is a fundamental tenet of democracy. The Prison Service is also independent. All those organisations are arm’s-length bodies. The Minister for policing and justice would have power only to introduce legislation. That legislation would be subject to cross-community consent.

There is a world of opportunity for the Assembly to tackle matters such as knife crime and fixed-penalty notices. On a recent visit to Edinburgh, Members learnt about the effect that fixed-penalty notices have on antisocial behaviour and criminal damage. It is regrettable that no DUP members were able to take part in that visit because they would have learned a thing or two. Nevertheless, Members who did go found it valuable.

The Assembly will face challenges if and when there is devolution of policing and justice. There is an £88 million shortfall in the policing budget during the CSR period. We are so used to dealing with millions and billions that people do not necessarily understand what that means. However, when it comes back to the Policing Board — *[Interruption.]* — I am glad to have finally engaged the attention of the DUP — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr B McCrea: There has already been a 33% reduction in police overtime, and there is to be a further 50% reduction; therefore, there will be no overtime. That is despite the fact that overtime is routinely required to provide a decent police service. There will be no community police officers, the required call centre will be kiboshed, and the full-time Reserve will be phased out over a three-year period.

Furthermore, the most important money issue at the moment is that the Chief Constable and his senior team have said that in future, consideration will need to be given to reducing the number of recruits, which will result in the number of regular police officers decreasing to below 7,500. Is that what we want?

Finally, there is also an issue about pension provision. It is wrong that we should be burdened with the pension provisions that are required as a result of the legacy of a terrorist campaign. There are 13,000 officers who need, and are entitled to, their pensions. That cost should be picked up by the British Exchequer before policing and justice powers are devolved.

Ian McCrea said that it will be some time before there is any movement on this issue. I wonder whether he is referring to a political lifetime. When Gerry Adams mentions St Andrews, I also wonder whether he remembers the Belfast Agreement and the commitment to decommissioning, because that did not happen on time either.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member’s time is up; he should resume his seat.

Mrs D Kelly: The SDLP believes that there is no good reason not to devolve policing and justice powers by May. That could have been realised had Sinn Féin not agreed, in the negotiations that led to the St Andrews Agreement, to give the DUP a triple veto — a point that Mr Adams has now publicly acknowledged. However, we are now in the midst of a phoney war, which is not so much about community confidence as about the DUP looking over its collective shoulder at the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV).

Members have referred to the recent opinion poll. As with all statistics, they pick out what they like. They like some polls, but not others. That poll showed a clear appetite among the public for the devolution of policing and justice powers. As politicians, we need to take the necessary steps to achieve that.

The DUP has claimed that there is insufficient confidence in the community for the devolution of justice powers. Of course, it means the unionist community. However, even that notion has been questioned by the recent poll, which shows not only cross-community support for the devolution of justice and policing powers, but that a reasonable majority of DUP supporters is in favour.

Furthermore, the argument that power over policing might be granted to a Sinn Féin Minister is misleading. All the parties involved in the compilation of the report have recognised that the Policing Board — on which all parties are represented — will continue, along with all the other accountability mechanisms set up under Patten, to be the major player that holds the police to account. As policing powers have in fact, if not in law, already been devolved to the Policing Board — of which I record my membership — it follows logically that justice powers should also be devolved through legislation.

Some Members have referred to the community’s requirement for, and its cries for, legislative powers. Owing to the collective failure, or the failure of some

parties in particular to accept their responsibilities under devolution, we have to go, cap in hand, to the NIO to get legislation introduced.

We have heard many calls and read much in the media about the need to end 50% remission. We also had to depend on the NIO for the sexual offences legislation. Furthermore, there is a need for crime and disorder legislation to tackle antisocial behaviour.

The devolution of policing powers would give us the opportunity to tackle high-volume, low-level crime much more effectively. That has been evidenced in Scotland, where statutory powers have been given to community safety partnerships, and where there are opportunities for integrated partnerships that allow local councils and local authorities to fund community officers. Such powers here would go some way to tackling the shortfall that exists in policing, as pointed out by Mr Basil McCrea.

There have also been recent reports on the prison estate, and how much work needs to be done to bring it up to an acceptable standard for the twenty-first century. However, that is another responsibility that will be shunned, despite daily cries from the public, who are demanding the devolution of policing and justice powers. One only has to listen to local radio stations — not a day goes by when a policing and justice issue is not highlighted.

It is a pity that Mr Adams has left the Chamber. The patronising manner in which he addressed the unionist Benches is the same one to which the Southern electorate did not take kindly. He acknowledged the triple veto, and made reference — as did Mr Alex Maskey — to the historic commitment by Sinn Féin to support policing. However, it was the nationalist community that made Sinn Féin support policing, because that community was crying out for proper and effective policing.

Sinn Féin came very late to the stage to support policing, and it is now trying to claim credit for that. I will not allow that to go unchallenged, because I know about the hard work that was done by my party — particularly by my party colleague Mr Attwood. That hard work can be seen in the very commendable SDLP submission to the Committee. That stands in stark contrast to rather pathetic Sinn Féin contributions — both Alex Maskey's speech today and his party's written submission to the Committee. One only has to compare the submissions of the two parties to see who is really ahead of the pack in respect of the devolution of policing and justice, and what needs to be done.

It is very clear that the entire community wants those powers to be devolved. Much work needs to be done on resources and allocations. Sinn Féin and the DUP have entered into a phoney war as they prepare for elections over the coming months. That is absolutely pathetic. We see tit-for-tat concessions, with the DUP

planning to veto the devolution of policing and justice powers, and Sinn Féin responding by threatening to veto proposals for a new football stadium. That is not responsible, it is not good governance, and it is not holding ourselves to account to the electorate. I hope that the electorate will remember that in the coming months and years.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. Éirím a labhairt i dtacaíocht na tuairisce seo.

As a member of the largest nationalist party, I commend the report to the Assembly. I welcome the work of the all-party —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: No. I have only just stood up. Suigh síos.

I welcome the report of the all-party Assembly and Executive Review Committee. The report represents the next stage on the road to transferring policing and justice powers away from London and into the hands of locally elected politicians.

It is worth noting that the report has received all-party backing in the Committee. That points to a reality whereby, as mature politicians, we can quickly commence and conclude discussions on issues of departmental models, and press speedily ahead with bringing proper democratic accountability to policing here for the very first time.

The vast majority of people here support that move. The Irish Government, the US Administration and the British Government all support that move. The British Government have stated that the draft legislation allowing for the transfer of those powers is written and is ready to be introduced. All that remains now is for the DUP to step up to the mark and show the type of political leadership that it displayed when it made the deal to ensure that the political institutions here were put back in place.

Some on the unionist Benches have argued that the transfer of policing and justice powers can happen only when public confidence allows. If that is the benchmark, the transfer should happen in May 2008, because the view expressed in opinion polls is that that public confidence exists now.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: Suigh síos.

Let us examine what the public has already entrusted us with. The Assembly is responsible for issues such as health, education and housing. The people have given us responsibility for eradicating child poverty and for building the kind of economy that benefits everyone. In short, they have entrusted us with securing the health

and well-being of their children. What greater vote of confidence is there than that?

It is that confidence that Minister Dodds is selling to big American investors when he tells them about the political stability that exists in the North and that the time is right for them to invest here. However, it is inconsistent of him to then tell the people of the North that such stability does not exist and that more needs to be done. Someone cannot be a leader internationally and be led locally without exposing massive inconsistencies in his or her arguments and leadership ability.

12.30 pm

It is clear that the majority of people here support the progress that has been made in the past year. They are pleased that locally accountable politicians are making decisions, and they want us to make decisions on policing and justice matters, which is an area that affects their everyday lives.

As a republican ex-prisoner, I sat on the Policing Board with the current DUP junior Minister Jeffrey Donaldson, and I now sit on it alongside the ex-junior Minister, the DUP's Ian Paisley Jnr. Through that board, we collectively hold the Chief Constable to account. As members of the board, we know that there is no public confidence; however, it is a lack of public confidence in the current system of justice. There are real and genuine concerns about issues such as call-out time, antisocial behaviour, death drivers, sex crime and repeat offenders on bail. Those issues affect all our people, regardless of creed, colour, class or political opinion, and the public wants local politicians to deal with them. Let us tackle those issues together in this Chamber, and let us all demand the transfer of powers to allow us to do just that. Indeed, the transfer of policing and justice powers will give communities — through their MLAs — a voice and an ability to influence the shape of the policing and justice system that is needed to address some of their real concerns.

As a member of the Policing Board, I found out recently that the Chief Constable wanted to inform the public about where he intended to make cuts. He intended to present as a fait accompli his plans for spending millions of pounds of public money without any consultation with, or accountability to, the board and, therefore, to the people.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: Suigh síos. No.

There was no vote in the Chamber, no consultation process and no impact assessment. In other words, it was like direct rule all over again. However, during direct rule, did we not all complain about unelected, unaccountable Englishmen spending our money and making decisions that affected the lives of our people? The transfer of policing and justice powers will change

that situation. It will mean that those who are in charge of policing policy and the policing purse strings will be answerable to the people whom they serve.

Let us be clear — the transfer of policing and justice powers will happen. There is little point in the DUP or others trying to delay the transfer simply for the sake of breaking through a deadline that was agreed at St Andrews. The issues are too important to the people whom we all represent for that sort of politicking to take place. Let us agree this report today, and, in the coming weeks, press ahead and work out the small number of important issues that remain. In that way, we can deliver those powers into local accountable hands in May, as was agreed in the St Andrews Agreement. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr G Robinson: As a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, I commend and thank the highly qualified and credible witnesses who appeared before the Committee. I must not forget to mention the Committee staff, who worked diligently to assist the Committee.

This is one of the most divisive and contentious issues that the Assembly will have to deal with. Feelings will run high, and I will certainly not spare the feelings of anyone who feels that my summary of the current position is incorrect.

Policing and justice powers cannot, should not, and will not be devolved to the Assembly in May 2008. Why? It is because paragraph 7 of the St Andrews Agreement states that public confidence is required for those powers to be devolved, and that confidence does not exist. An agreed way forward is nowhere in sight, and without consensus, it would be premature to transfer policing and justice powers to the Assembly.

We should ask ourselves why there is no public confidence. The main factor is the existence of the IRA army council, despite claims from the IRA and Sinn Féin that the terrorist campaign is over. If that campaign is truly over, why does that body remain in place?

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr G Robinson: No; it is too near lunchtime.
[Laughter.]

Unionists are fearful that that blood-stained body remains in place as a plan B for republicans. Perhaps the Members opposite can give the Assembly a date on which the army council will disappear into the annals of history along with their defeated republican political agenda. That step must be taken before confidence can begin to be built in the unionist community. The Members opposite will say that the army council is nothing to do with them, but that does not wash with me. There are self-confessed ex-IRA prisoners sitting on their Benches, so, at worst, they have great influence on, if not control over, the IRA army council.

There must also be a cessation of attacks on Orange Halls and on unionist culture as a whole — whether it is objection to the presence of a Princess Diana mug in Limavady Borough Council or to the statue of Carson at Stormont.

There are also Members opposite who said that they would not co-operate — and would tell constituents not to co-operate — with the PSNI. The deputy First Minister gloated recently that he would have been happy to shoot British troops on the streets of Londonderry. Once republicans stop making such utterances, perhaps — just perhaps — the unionist population will begin to believe that they are serious about a peaceful future, and confidence may begin to grow.

The DUP never agreed to the May 2008 date for the devolution of policing and justice powers. That is in contrast to the UUP, which is telling a gloriously rewritten history of its own. It was willing to settle for the devolution of policing and justice powers without the concessions that the DUP wrung out of republican representatives.

The DUP wants policing and justice powers to be devolved. However, that can only happen when trust and community confidence is high throughout Northern Ireland and the budgetary requirements to fulfil those obligations are in place. When those powers are eventually devolved to the Assembly in a few lifetimes, there is no point having a system that is not properly financed. We want a world-class system of policing and justice to continue evolving, which cannot happen without sufficient funding. Although I look forward, with confidence, to when the powers are eventually devolved, the time is not right.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.38 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. A cold start is always difficult after a break in a debate. Thus far, the debate has been useful, although the political views that have been outlined by parties and individuals have, at times, been repetitive.

The report by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee represents progress. It has come about after good work in the Committee by all parties, and we must now move ahead to finish the job of taking the important powers of policing and justice into our hands, and begin delivering on the issue for the people who elected us. Progress has been made by the Committee. Alban Maginness made the criticism that there was no meat on the bones, and I assume that he was referring to the lack of a transfer date. The Committee did not agree on a transfer date; however, it sent out a clear signal that all the political parties have a responsibility to sit down and work out the issue. The onus is on Sinn Féin and the DUP to take the lead, and — let me make it clear — Sinn Féin remains committed to the transfer of policing and justice powers by the May deadline.

The issue has been discussed at length; it was the main topic of debate at the talks that led to the St Andrews Agreement Act 2006. We intend to ensure that all the political parties and Governments that had an input into that Act live up to their commitments. The DUP said that, for confidence reasons, it cannot move forward. It stated that there is a lack of confidence in the unionist community, although I suspect that its reasons have much more to do with confidence among its rank and file than with confidence in the wider unionist community.

The DUP is going through a process of change, and that always leads to a certain lack of stability. It intends to elect a new leader in the near future. Achieving leadership is the easy part; the difficult part is deciding what to do as leader. That will be a test for whoever the DUP decides to make its new leader. We all know who the leader will be, but that is a matter for the DUP. The new leader of the DUP must show that not only can he lead his party, but that he can lead his community and the wider community. The issue of policing and justice has great importance to all communities at a grassroots level.

Throughout the debate, the Ulster Unionist Party has shown the benefit at community level of the devolution of policing and justice powers. The Ulster Unionist Party's contributions have provided an insight into a side of thinking in unionism that has not yet reached its public profile. Although the Ulster Unionist Party outlined the reasons why devolution of policing and justice should

take place, it then said that there is no confidence for that in unionism. I am concerned that the Ulster Unionist Party will not take a leadership role on the issue. Despite the comments of its leader, Mr Empey, that it will not be subsumed by the DUP, the Ulster Unionist Party is waiting to see what the DUP will do so that it can follow it. Will the Ulster Unionist Party move when the DUP decides that the necessary confidence exists? Its position does not make sense. If the arguments in favour of the need for the transfer of policing and justice powers to communities are effectual, as I think they are, the Ulster Unionist Party has a responsibility to step forward and provide leadership.

As I listened to some of the DUP contributions, I almost went back in time to just over a year ago. When I sat in the Chamber in January and February 2007, many of the same DUP Members who spoke today said that they would never, ever share power with Sinn Féin. One present DUP Minister told me that I would be an old man before the DUP would share power with Sinn Féin. I know that I have a more few grey hairs than I had this time last year, but I am not an old man. Perhaps those statements were genuine and sincere at that time, but that shows that even the most entrenched positions at a certain period in history can move. Why did the DUP move? I believe that it was because the wider populace insisted that it did.

They insisted that the situation and the conditions — as they often refer to the calendar — were correct for movement into a power-sharing Executive, the establishment of the all-Ireland institutions and the progression of a shared future and identity on the island of Ireland.

If people are prepared to take courageous steps — that relates to what I said about the Ulster Unionist Party — and show leadership on the issue, the community will also allow its voice to be heard. Church leaders, trade unions and civic society must make their opinions heard on the transfer of policing and justice, because it is not merely a political matter; it is about improving the lives of our citizens and helping to ensure that legislation is in place to protect elderly and vulnerable people in society.

Some DUP contributors stated that there will be no transfer of policing and justice as long as attacks on Orange Halls continue. However, a key DUP demand is that legislation be introduced that will speed up compensation procedures for attacks, for instance, on Orange Halls. They are the people who are allowing that matter to rest in the hands of the British Minister who has responsibility for justice. It is wrong that Orange Halls are being attacked, but if those attacks continue to happen, and if the compensation process does not meet the needs of the Loyal Orders, the DUP should be part of the organisation that takes ownership of the issue, runs with it and has the right to introduce

legislation to change it. As the circumstances stand, the DUP cannot change the legislation. The British direct rule Ministers who were criticised for the mismanagement of the Health Service, finance and the Departments are continuing to run policing and justice poorly.

I am the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee, and I know that tens of millions of pounds are spent on our policing and justice system, and there is no proper scrutiny of that financing. The Policing Board has a scrutiny role, but the Public Accounts Committee will also play a valuable role. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Simon Hamilton, who is a young man.

Mr Hamilton: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker; flattery will get you everywhere. I will do my best not to be “repetitive” — in the words of the previous Member who spoke — although I fear that I may dip into repetitiousness from time to time.

I repeat the sentiment that the DUP supports devolution, if it is required. The DUP supported devolution long ago; when other parties had dalliances with different ideas, the party supported devolution. We also support the transfer of maximum powers into locally —
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Kennedy: Where did he get that?

Mr Hamilton: The dog has been hit by the stick that has been thrown.

We support the transfer of maximum powers to locally accountable hands in Stormont, and that includes, in principle, policing and justice powers. However, as has been oft repeated today — and as has been said previously and, no doubt, will be said again — those powers will be transferred only when sufficient confidence has been established in the community.

Those inside and outside the Assembly who say that today’s debate and report are the first steps towards the devolution of policing and justice need only read the report to get their response — loud and clear. I congratulate the Committee members who, at times, had to sit through taxing and detailed evidence sessions in order to complete the report. It is technical in nature, but when it comes down to the brass tacks of when and how policing and justice powers will be transferred, the report does not provide a clear path as to their imminent devolution. There is no agreement on when policing and justice powers will be transferred.

I congratulate Jimmy Spratt on his appointment as the Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. It is an important Committee that will carry out significant work on the transfer of policing and justice powers and other issues in the Assembly. In the concluding part of Mr Spratt’s opening speech, he touched on recommendation 41 of the report, which

states that there is no agreement on the timing of the devolution of policing and justice matters. The DUP has said consistently that there is no prospect of policing and justice powers being devolved until the required community confidence has been achieved. Today, that sentiment has been repeated on the DUP Benches and by others on this side of the Chamber, and it has also been mentioned by the Alliance Party.

It is understandable that policing and justice powers are a sensitive issue. As a result of over three decades of republican violence, directed against the police and, at times, against the courts and justice system, many in our community are rightly perturbed at the thought of Sinn Féin having a role in policing and justice.

That, in part, is why my party ensured the negotiation of what has been called “the triple lock”, described in the SDLP’s written submission in evidence to the Committee as “a DUP Veto.” We thank the SDLP for that comment; it is absolutely accurate. The triple lock comprises a recommendation by the First Minister, Assembly approval and Westminster agreement.

My friend the Chairman of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee and SDLP leader, Mr Durkan, said of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006:

“That was the act that provided for the so-called triple lock being given to the DUP. It allowed ultimate control to rest on a DUP veto, and unfortunately the British government conceded that veto to them.”

I am sure that I have been faithful in reporting his remarks. It is in my interests to do so, and in his as well.

The St Andrews Agreement, which has been talked about today, includes the aspirational, arbitrary May deadline. That was set by the Government; it was not agreed with my party. We are under no obligation to meet it and we will not meet it, because community confidence is not there.

It would be churlish not to recognise that major steps forward have been taken by republicans in policing and justice matters. Sinn Féin now supports the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the administration of British justice in Ireland. Sinn Féin Ministers in the Assembly have pledged their support to policing and the courts. As the Chief Constable has said, there is unprecedented republican support for the police and their investigations in republican strongholds across Northern Ireland.

Only last week, I noticed that The Police are coming to perform a concert at Stormont at the end of June. I am much too young to remember them the first time round. Much to my surprise, I saw the deputy First Minister issue a statement welcoming The Police to Stormont. That is not something that always happened in the past, and it is a sign of how the DUP has nudged Sinn Féin —

Mr Kennedy: I remind the Member that one of the big hits that The Police had went:

“Every move you make ... every step you take”.

Mr Hamilton: “I’ll be watching you” — that was the one.

Obviously, Mr Kennedy, another old boy, does remember them from the first time around. Anyway, it is another surprising sign of Sinn Féin’s support for the police.

However, in all seriousness, this is a matter on which there is insufficient community confidence at present. Sinn Féin and the republican movement could take many significant steps to assist in building that confidence, not least by addressing the issue of the IRA army council.

There is no agreement as to how, under what format, or according to which model policing and justice powers should be devolved. Recommendation 20 in the report shows that. As other Members have said today, at this stage, there is no favourable financial resource situation for the police in Northern Ireland. Issue 4 in the report concentrates on that matter. As has been mentioned, there is a deficit of almost £90 million in the police budget for the CSR period. That major issue would have to be overcome.

I say to the Government — and send a message to the NIO — that pressure will not work. Publishing legislation is a tactic that they have tried before and which has failed. It will not work this time either. Instead of wasting time publishing legislation on something that will not happen, they would be much better dealing with some of the other issues in respect of policing and justice that are much needed in Northern Ireland.

The DUP will not be bullied into a position that is not right, or into moving at the wrong time, on an issue of this magnitude.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this important debate. I offer my congratulations to the new Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, Mr Spratt. I wish him well and look forward to working with him in the Committee on this and other important issues. I also take the opportunity — though I am not supposed to, because such people are supposed to remain “invisible” — to pay tribute to the Committee Clerk and the officials of the Committee for all their hard work in preparing and compiling the report.

2.15 pm

At the beginning of the year, the then junior Minister, who has since resigned, said that he was prepared to offer what he called leadership on policing and justice matters. Given that that was not just any Minister, but the son of the First Minister and, in effect, his strong right arm and, in many ways, his political alter ego,

many of us sat up and listened because we recognised the early warning signs of what appeared to be DUP delivery on yet another DUP/Sinn Féin side deal from the time of the St Andrews Agreement. Given the revelations that followed a freedom of information inquiry by the leader of Traditional Unionist Voice, Jim Allister MEP, it appeared that the then junior Minister was, in effect, a Minister for side deals, particularly those with a North Antrim flavour. Leadership is a DUP-ism, or euphemism, for promising the electorate one thing and doing another. Of course, the DUP majors in breaking its word to the electorate.

The side deal's choreography assumed even starker proportions when the Secretary of State, Shaun Woodward, produced yet another NIO poll, which suggested that the required majority of unionists in support of the devolution of policing and justice was now in place. Those of us who have been around this place for considerable time follow matters concerning such NIO polls with a high degree of cynicism. Northern Ireland Office polls are remarkable. They appear at auspicious moments and always supply information that staggers everyone and seems to contradict that which we mere mortals have encountered on the doorstep and in widespread consultation with constituents.

That poll may have been designed to stiffen the resolve of the DUP, which was surprised that the rest of us were somewhat cynical about the type of leadership that it had been offering on a broad range of subjects — most of which involved a fair degree of chuckling. The DUP was taken aback by the ferocity of the Ulster Unionist Party's and others' rejection of the need to devolve policing and justice powers.

Alternatively, the Northern Ireland Office poll may have just been part of the internal choreography of the devolution of policing and justice powers, in conjunction with the DUP offer of leadership, and other confidence-building measures.

Given the intensity of the electorate's disengagement from the DUP — evidence of which we witnessed in Dromore — the party that has delivered for itself but not for Northern Ireland, and certainly not for unionism, has back-pedalled on its January 2008 offer of leadership on the devolution of policing and justice. That offer now appears to have been dumped, along with the junior Minister and the First Minister. In the coming months, it will be interesting to discover who and what else the DUP dumps. The Maze stadium appears to be the next casualty. Perhaps Minister Poots had better watch out.

The former Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee — who is now a junior Minister — appears to be the doyen of policy dumpers. The former junior Minister offered leadership. His replace-

ment offers a U-turn — but U-turns are that man's speciality.

The U-turn on the devolution of policing and justice is presented in the inventive language used by, and associated with, the DUP's Robinsonian wing. Instead of offering leadership, it tells us that the time is not right. I am told that, in Civil Service speak, that means that the matter is dead. I have no problem with that. As far as I am concerned, the matter could be as dead as a dodo, because I believe that there is no appetite in the unionist community for the devolution of policing and justice. We have often heard that something might be too little, too late. The devolution of policing and justice is too much, too soon.

In recent days, Sinn Féin's posturing over the issue of neutral environments, and the ludicrous and provocative proposal to celebrate the life of a dangerous and murderous terrorist in this Building's Long Gallery, is evidence that Northern Ireland is not yet ready for the devolution of the controversial matter of policing and justice.

Perhaps those backward-looking gestures by Sinn Féin are a fit of pique because the DUP is not delivering on the St Andrews side deal, for the introduction of which the former junior Minister was offering leadership. Whatever the truth of the matter, it will be good if this devolutionary move is postponed until such time as confidence exists in the unionist community that Sinn Féin is not just carrying on the war by other means.

Mr Durkan: I join with others in commending the Assembly and Executive Review Committee for the work that is reflected in its report. I congratulate the Chairperson of the Committee, who has arrived here today in the style of Janet Webb, the woman who appeared at the end of Morecambe and Wise shows and said:

"I'd like to thank you for watching me and my little show here tonight. If you've enjoyed it, then it's all been worthwhile. So until we meet again, goodnight, and I love you all!"

A very good job he made of it. *[Laughter.]* It was his Janet Webb spot today on behalf of the Committee and the report.

In considering the volume of work that is represented in the report, one can see that it records a wide-ranging consensus, and that a lot of the technical and procedural matters therein are not particularly contentious. The more the parties have examined the issues, the more layers of agreement and understanding have built up. Even on questions concerning the number of Departments or Ministers, on which there used to be a wider variety of views and options being expressed by parties, there is much more crystallisation, and that represents progress.

One of the benefits to have arisen from this issue so far is that it has been addressed by a Committee of this Assembly, even if not necessarily in a whole-hearted,

fully-engaged way. All the parties are dealing with it in a competent, responsible manner. Devolution of justice and policing has benefited from being part of the working agenda of these institutions and of all political parties.

On previous occasions in this process, when serious issues like this were dealt with through side deals and rival side deals between different parties and the two Governments, we ended up with bad processes, bad politics and bad outcomes. The more that the situation becomes one in which the process is the institutions and the institutions are the process, the more we will take things forward. It is important that we do not mark the end of consensus, agreement and understanding on the devolution of justice and policing with this debate and by meeting the 27 March deadline for submitting a report.

The DUP asserted over a number of years that it would be a political lifetime — indeed members of the DUP competed over how many political lifetimes it might take — before devolution of justice and policing could take place. One does not know whether the lifetime referred to is an Ian Paisley Snr political lifetime, or an Ian Paisley Jnr ministerial lifetime. I hope that it is the latter, and that we get there soon, because this community needs to see us get there.

This is meant to be a legislative Assembly, yet the range of matters on which we can legislate suffers from a huge deficit as we are not actually able to legislate on areas of criminal law. Even on many of the public service and other public policy matters on which we can legislate, we are limited and tethered in the degree to which we can do so. We are also limited and compromised in the degree to which we can implement the full spirit and intent of that legislation, because we do not have the complete suite of devolved powers and functions.

When one considers important issues such as drug abuse, antisocial behaviour or road safety — which involve so many of the existing devolved Departments and agencies, but also need the necessary co-operation, involvement and pro-activity of the police service — it is clear that the picture is incomplete as far as devolution and accountable public policy are concerned. That needs to improve, and that is why we need devolution of justice and policing sooner rather than later.

I hope that the new leader of the DUP will not make the mistake of brandishing that party's veto by way of the triple lock — or a quadruple lock, as some DUP MPs described it during the legislation's progress through Westminster. Another DUP MP said that it was not a quadruple lock; it was a double-double lock. Whatever it was, it amounted to a DUP veto that that party was very happy with. We are stuck with that DUP veto. At least Sinn Féin now recognises that fact, having spent 2006 and 2007 denying that it existed, and having insisted

that legislation created a certainty of the devolution of justice and policing when it deliberately did not.

I say to the DUP: do not get stuck with that veto for long. There are lessons for the new DUP leader from David Trimble's mistake of buying the false argument — put forward by people such as Jonathan Powell — that there was profit for him in creating uncertainty around these institutions, that he could either unite dissenting voices in his party, or that it would give him some other sort of leverage in the process that he could use as bargaining power. That uncertainty damaged the institutions, and, as it was indulged for too long, ended up damaging David Trimble and his party. I hope that the new leader of the DUP will recognise that it is important to move sooner rather than later on the issue of the devolution of justice and policing, not just to confirm his or her own proper authority, but to confirm the true authority and competence of these arrangements.

In a situation in which we are trying to attract new investment and are looking forward to the investment conference, it is wrong to create such an air of uncertainty around some fundamental political matters. It is also important that the DUP and the Ulster Unionists look past testing Sinn Féin on its latest condemnation of republican dissident activity, or how it calls for co-operation with the police. If we all want to unite to defy and deny the agenda of the so-called dissident republicans, we should achieve the devolution of justice and policing as soon as possible, because they are stuck in the old Provo-speak groove of talking about Crown forces and British police forces. So long as we do not have the devolution of justice and policing, we play onside their foul agenda.

Mr Storey: I welcome Mr Spratt to his new position, and commend him. I will not concur with the comments made by the previous contributor unless Mr Spratt assumes that particular role.

I welcome the substantial documents that we have in front of us today, although some might question whether there is much of substance in them. We must, however, face up to the fact that although the Committee has produced its report — on which it has done a substantial amount of work — it cannot create the circumstances in which the step towards the devolution of policing and justice can be made.

Such a step can only be taken at the right time and under the right circumstances. From a unionist perspective, and in the views of those people whom I represent, there is no such circumstance at the moment, despite NIO polls and the words of those who try to convey to us that there is widespread acceptance in the community for the devolution of policing and justice powers. The reality, when I am in my constituency, is that that is not the case.

There are some who, laughably, try to tell us that the circumstances are right, and that now is the right time. Among those adopting that position are the Secretary of State, and, unsurprisingly, the Sinn Féin/NIO alliance, which tells us that everyone is happy and ready to move. However, that is simply not the case. That fact is also acknowledged by the Ulster Unionist Party, and I am glad about that, because it has not always done so. Mr Kennedy's contribution was more about berating the DUP and trying to put some political spin on his position rather than debating policing and justice.

2.30 pm

Mr Hamilton: The Member will have noted that I tried to intervene during the speech that was made by the deputy leader of the Ulster Unionist Party — I will put the question to you instead, Mervyn. I was going to ask Mr Kennedy whether he could explain — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Storey: OK. I'll be Danny Kennedy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Hamilton, please direct your comments through the Chair, and not to another Member.

Mr Hamilton: I apologise. I wanted to ask Mr Kennedy whether there was an explanation for the comments that were made by the Ulster Unionist Party representative at a meeting of the Transitional Assembly's Sub-Group on Policing and Justice Matters in December 2006, when he said:

"if the barrier to Sinn Féin announcing support for the police was removed and devolution is restored, this could provide the necessary confidence."

Today, Ulster Unionist Members have repeatedly voiced their opposition to the devolution of policing and justice because they claim that the necessary confidence does not exist. However, in 2006, the UUP representative on the Preparation for Government Committee said that, under certain circumstances, policing and justice would be devolved. Those circumstances are in place now, so perhaps the Member could explain his party's opposition.

Mr Storey: I thank my honourable friend for that intervention.

Remember the former leader of the Ulster Unionist Party — if my history is right, I think he was called David Trimble —

Mr Simpson: Who?

Mr Storey: He is the long-since-forgotten former leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, but the legacy that he left this country is not forgotten. Remember that, had we remained under David Trimble's leadership and direction, policing and justice would have been devolved already. We do not take lectures from the Ulster Unionist Party about U-turns because there have

been so many U-turns in the history of the Ulster Unionist Party that they would fill the Chamber.

Mr B McCrea: Who is Paisley?

Mr Storey: Dr Paisley is the leader of this party, who — despite all the failures of the Ulster Unionist Party — has brought this country to where it is today.

Yesterday, David Burnside said in the Chamber:

"I am not giving way to Paisleyites". — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 28, p242, col 2].*

Unfortunately, Mr Burnside is not even in the Chamber today to listen to a Paisleyite — he very seldom is.

Lord Morrow: He does not do Tuesdays.

Mr Storey: My friend is right; Mr Burnside does not do Tuesdays. I am sure, however, that he is glad that his party has listened to the DUP. It will stick in his big-house-unionist, fur-coat-brigade-unionism craw that the DUP will not change its position on this matter.

Having said enough about the Ulster Unionist Party, at least for now, I turn my attention to the SDLP. I will keep the other party until last.

In its submission to the 'Report on the Inquiry into the Devolution of Policing and Justice Matters' the SDLP stated — and Mr Durkan has confirmed that position today — that:

"The SDLP is concerned at the veto acquired by the DUP over the devolution of justice... The SDLP believes that this veto should be removed".

Who gained that veto? It was not the Ulster Unionist Party. Who ensured that the issue of policing and justice, and support for the rule of law, was put on the table? It was not the Ulster Unionist Party; they forgot about the police. Remember Lord Maginness — who had the ambitions of a field marshal and the ability of a field mouse — *[Laughter.]*

He was the person who tried to wash his hands of the changing of the name of the RUC.

Mr Hamilton: He was responsible for 50:50 recruitment as well.

Mr Storey: That is correct. Now, I turn my attention to Sinn Féin. Unfortunately, the Education Minister is not present in the Chamber. However, let me say —

Mr Brady: Your time is up.

Mr Storey: I have 45 seconds left.

Sinn Féin faces a big challenge in ensuring that the unionist community is sufficiently confident to move forward on this issue. For example, Sinn Féin created the problem around parading, and they are failing miserably in helping to resolve that problem. Sinn Féin must deal with that issue.

I must have an extra minute, so I will continue. My community has no confidence in a party that cannot go

to the police in the Short Strand and have a public meeting without orchestrating disruption. It has no confidence in a party that cannot come clean about the murder of Paul Quinn, and it has no confidence in a party whose Minister — Conor Murphy — tells us that he has met illegal IRA terrorists, but is not prepared to give their names to the police. We need to have that confidence, and the party opposite must ensure that we get that so that we can move forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up. I will decide how much time you have, Mr Storey.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Mervyn Storey criticised all the parties in the Chamber except Mr Neeson's party. Is that appropriate under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998?

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

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I too thank the Committee staff, and the Clerk in particular, for producing the report. I genuinely welcome Jimmy Spratt as the new Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. It will be a baptism of fire for him. There are plenty of issues to be resolved, and confidence is one of them.

I was tempted to pass remarks on some comments that you made, Mervyn Storey, but I will leave those for another day.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Please address your remarks through the Chair.

Ms Ní Chuilín: With your indulgence, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I do not mind being told off, as long as my point has been made.

I look forward to the SDLP proposing its amendments at Westminster. The SDLP has been doing a lot of sabre-rattling — one is tempted to say all fluff and no stuff — but we will simply have to wait and see. Everyone agrees that, since the St Andrews Agreement, the political landscape here has been transformed. More often than not, most Members try to have sensible debates about issues that affect people's lives, such as anti-poverty strategies, suicide prevention and support in our communities. We all recognise that we have a role to play in those issues.

The DUP has entered into power-sharing institutions for the first time. We now have an inclusive Government, which, for all intents and purposes, is enjoying the support of the whole community.

A Member: Apart from Sean Neeson.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, apart from that other party, as Basil McCrea said when he mentioned section 75. However, the essence of what I am trying to say is that all parties represented in the Chamber are involved in making decisions and in contributing to those

decisions — if not in Government, then certainly in Committees. There is no need to be crass.

We have enjoyed a lot of international goodwill. The need to attract inward investment has been mentioned in various debates, and mention has been made of the investment conference that will take place here in May. That will coincide with the timetable for the transfer of policing and justice powers set out in St Andrews. Central to our task are creating opportunities, promoting job creation and building our economy. We must demonstrate that the days of political instability have passed for good. The transfer of policing and justice powers would be a clear demonstration by political leaders that the institutions are stable and will be long-lasting.

Mr Storey: The Member stated that the institutions will be "long-lasting", and I welcome that comment. However, in the report's minutes of evidence for 23 October 2007, the Member said:

"by 2016, God knows who will be here."

In the same minutes of evidence, her colleague Mr O'Dowd said:

"To confuse matters even more, we could set up a ministry that would then be scrutinised by the efficiency review panel in 2016 or earlier. We could introduce an interim arrangement that could be changed again by future Administrations."

Given that those two Sinn Féin MLAs have been preparing for a devolved Northern Ireland Administration long before 2016, does the Member not think that it would be more honest if she were to tell the rest of her party that the pipe dream of establishing a united Ireland by 2016 is now out the window? Judging by those comments, I think that Sinn Féin is not even preparing for it.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Drat, I am absolutely caught out by that one. I thank Mervyn Storey — through the Deputy Speaker — for that history lesson. Mervyn is consistent; we always get a bit of crack out of him —

Mr Storey: Crack is an illegal substance that you are not allowed to take, Carál.

A Member: Perhaps she should try it.

Ms Ní Chuilín: God loves a trier. I am confident that there will be a united Ireland. As sure as the day is Tuesday, there will be a united Ireland — and Mervyn Storey can quote that. Unlike Danny Kennedy and David Burnside, I do not mind Mondays, and I also do Tuesdays.

We need to demonstrate to the world that there is an opportunity to come here and that this place is worth investing in. We need to plan for a better future and show that we have moved on and copper fastened the peace process. Despite all the nonsense in the House, we now have democratic accountability and political institutions, and we need to work towards better political stability, without which there will be no economic stability

and no investment for our economy. One cannot be separated from the other. The DUP needs to step up to the mark. It is not a question of “if” — it is a question of “when”. The Assembly needs to send out a clear message to the voters that we are here to do a job and that we are capable of doing that job. The House needs to hold the PSNI to account and examine issues such as bail for repeat offenders. Members are sending out the wrong message to constituents. All parties represented on the Assembly and Executive Review Committee have shown a willingness to deal with the issue. Everything is ready to transfer policing and justice powers into the hands of locally elected representatives. We now need to demonstrate political will, and the DUP needs to have the confidence to accept the challenge and move ahead. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Neeson: Several Members have referred to the report as the all-party report, which is rubbish; it is not an all-party report. No member of the Alliance Party or the United Community group participated in the Committee, and that is a great weakness in the report.

The report illustrates the divisions that still exist in the Assembly. If policing and justice powers are to be devolved, the Assembly must provide stable government. However, that is not the case, as last week’s events clearly demonstrate. The debacle over the Mairéad Farrell ceremony clearly shows that the glorification of terrorism is not the way forward for the Assembly. Furthermore, it clearly demonstrates the great division that still exists between Sinn Féin and the DUP.

One very clear upshot of that event is that, if Members wish to sponsor an event in Parliament Buildings, they require three signatures to demonstrate cross-community support. I supported that decision in the Commission. However, yesterday, my colleague Kieran McCarthy submitted an application form for an event, with three signatures from people of different backgrounds, which was turned down because the three signatures came from Members from the cross-community Alliance Party. That is a wake-up call for the Assembly. It shows clearly that, if the Assembly is to create stable Government, it must be based on consensus.

2.45 pm

I turn to the composition of the existing Policing Board. When Ian Paisley Jnr was reappointed to the board, he stated that he was there to provide a strong voice for unionism. Does that imply that we are moving towards political policing?

I served on the former Police Authority for Northern Ireland for two terms, before and after the ceasefire. Before the ceasefire, the Northern Ireland Office was prepared to use Alliance Party members to serve on the Police Authority but, post-devolution, the Alliance

Party is not represented, and I view that as a democratic deficit in respect of the current Policing Board.

The Alliance Party strongly believes in the devolution of policing and justice powers to the Assembly. I hope that that will come sooner rather than later. If devolution is to happen, the confidence must be created in our society for the public to support it, although I accept that recent opinion polls clearly suggest that people are moving towards accepting the devolution of those powers.

Last week during Question Time I asked the First Minister a question about ending automatic 50% remission for prisoners. That should be a matter for the Assembly to deal with, rather than an excepted matter. I agree entirely with what Basil McCrea said about RUC Reserve pensions. That issue must be addressed by the British Treasury before the devolution of powers.

Many people have asked whether a deal was done at St Andrews. For me, the most significant thing about St Andrews was the fact that the DUP, at long last, endorsed the Good Friday Agreement, and I welcome that very much.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Some Members: Rubbish.

Mr Neeson: When devolution of policing and justice powers takes place, the Assembly will have to address some serious issues — none more serious than finance. It is true that finance was never a problem during the Troubles because we were dealing with terrorism. It was clear that that was the number one priority for the Government to address. However, we are moving into a new dispensation, and the entire issue of fixing and sticking to budgets will be important.

When I was a member of the Police Authority, I visited several constabularies in other parts of the UK. As Jimmy Spratt will know, the ratio of police officers to the general population in those areas was much smaller than that in Northern Ireland. That matter will need to be addressed.

Finally, there has been talk of having two Ministers for policing and justice. In the Alliance Party’s view, that is not on — there should be one ministerial post. A couple of years ago, we found ourselves in a crazy situation when a decision was made to create a new city in each part of the United Kingdom. The Government could not nominate one area in Northern Ireland; they had to create two cities — Newry and Lisburn.

We must get away from the practice of duplicating roles in order to satisfy different communities and political parties.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. I congratulate my colleague Jimmy Spratt on his elevation to the

position of Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, and I wish him well for the future.

Policing and justice is undoubtedly a sensitive matter in Northern Ireland. Our troubled past means that the issue is not as straightforward as it is in other devolved parts of the UK. I would love to be able to say that we have reached a stage where we can handle all policing and justice matters. However, the bare fact is that some people in Northern Ireland have not made their intentions clear enough or their commitments sure enough for us to bring those matters into the hands of those in this Chamber. We therefore read the report with a sceptical eye to see what recommendations were agreed and what they might mean to the people of Northern Ireland.

Ther er o' coorse issies which sum fin tae be argimentive. Metters o' national security er deald wi iver aw bi UK Giverment wi' oot oany input bi this Chamber. This tae me wud seem common sense an yit there r fowk whua feel that they shud hae tha final sae aboot aw whut gangs oan in the Proavins. This isnae tha wae nor wull it iver be.

Whun aw the stanin an playin wi woards is din this is yin impoartint fact an that is we stae a' pert o' tha UK an Norlin Airlan, an in sic metters we hae oor richt no oonly tae spake an direct oan but which will richtfully stae in tha hans o' thaa Hoose o' Commons — in which we hae guid an muckle representatshun.

There are issues that some people find to be contentious but that I find to be common sense. For example, matters of national security are dealt with entirely by UK-wide governance and without interference from anyone in this Chamber. That seems common sense to me, yet some people believe that they should have the final say on anything that happens in the Province. However, that is not the way it is, nor the way it will be.

When all the posturing and wordplay is done, there is one immutable fact: we remain part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and, as such, there are matters about which we will have our democratic right to speak and provide guidance on but that will rightfully remain with the House of Commons, where we have ample representation.

On the whole, the report had a common-sense attitude to most matters. It considered the input of the various bodies that had attended Committee meetings and took on board the recommendations of the Northern Ireland Office, among others. I am not known for my negativity — indeed, quite the opposite — and I do not deem myself to be negative in saying that some people have amply displayed, through emotive language and actions and political point scoring, that we are not in a position to implement full devolution of policing and justice to the Province. I am merely being factual when I state that.

When Members consider Northern Ireland's current situation, it is clear that we have come a long way.

However, we have not yet completed that journey. Confidence in some sections of the House is still not sufficient to engender the belief that we are ready for devolution of those powers. Indeed, we need look no further than the attempted honouring of an IRA terrorist in a public, shared space to see that it is valid to doubt whether some people have stepped far enough from their past deeds to be able to determine matters of policing and justice rationally and objectively. One need only read the Official Report of the debate on the burning of Orange Halls to see why there is no confidence and to see how things must be changed in order to improve unionist confidence before the powers in question can be devolved.

I consider the report to be objective and well considered in that respect, given that it does not give a definitive time frame for the full devolution of powers. It is an unfortunate fact that the rest of this journey can go only at a pace that is set by those who attempt to instil confidence by showing a complete removal from past atrocities. Last week's events highlight the distance that must be travelled and the pace that has been set thus far, and they also suggest that a longer journey in confidence building is required.

The policy of 50:50 recruitment to the PSNI is one of the unspeakable wrongs of this Province, given that it has resulted in the exclusion of able and experienced people primarily because of their religious persuasion. We want that to be changed so that young Protestants can apply for jobs in the police and have their opportunities and pedigree considered on an equitable basis, rather than on the basis of where they go on a Sunday or where they hang their hat.

Many young men and women have spoken to me about the issue, and the quicker it is sorted out, the better.

The report shows how Northern Ireland would benefit in many ways in its day-to-day running were it to have greater legislative power over situations. However, there is an overarching concern that cannot be overlooked. There has been some talk about opinion polls today. The opinion polls carried out by the Secretary of State show that there is a downward turn in the number of people who agree that policing and justice should be devolved. Indeed, opinion polls are showing a move in the opposite direction. The rise in the number of undecided Committee members shows that there is more confusion and not more confidence.

It is clear that the unionist population has significantly less belief that policing and justice should be devolved at present, and 11% more people are saying that it should not be devolved. Until that situation is resolved and the general public have more confidence, I am not willing to undertake that step on behalf of my constituents who are telling me how they feel.

Show me, my party and this Chamber the reasons why we should believe that there has been a change of attitude by those who breed mistrust and fear, and I will support devolution in totality. Until then, I concur with the report's findings, and I agree that certain matters should be devolved while others should remain reserved for the time being and will be a matter for the House of Commons and our elected representatives to determine. None of the report's findings can be implemented until there is a positive move to instil belief that Northern Ireland — and each Member in the Chamber — is ready, equipped and committed to deal properly with the devolution of policing and justice. That is not yet the case and, therefore, I firmly agree with the report's findings and commend it to the Chamber.

Mr Attwood: I acknowledge the work of the outgoing Chairperson of the Committee, who conducted it with no little skill, and I welcome Mr Spratt. I also acknowledge the work of the Committee staff. I do not know whether Committee members would agree with me, but I found the experience a curious mixture of shadow-boxing, paint drying, capacity building and some political maturing; and, for all of that, it was a useful experience.

Given that matters remain unresolved, the SDLP is calling for round-table political negotiations at the earliest possible opportunity to resolve the outstanding matters identified in the report, and any other matters that are beginning to invade the space of the Assembly. If we do not get a grip on those matters we may lose the grip on many others, which we can ill-afford to do.

If we are to go into those negotiations, we must clear some of the fog around the devolution of policing and justice. Some of that has been outlined already. It is inconsistent to share policing and political responsibility but not share responsibility for justice. Setting aside the issue of confidence, if people in the North were asked how they would reconcile sharing policing and political powers and yet deny the opportunity to share justice power, they would say that it does not make sense. The DUP must get its head round that.

I listened to a DUP Member quote what someone in the UUP said in 2006. Peter Robinson said in 2004 that the devolution of policing and justice powers was “no big move”. If it was “no big move” four years ago — and before the IRA had done all that it has now done — how is it such a big move now? The DUP will have to face up to that fact in the forthcoming negotiations.

Sinn Féin must also face up to some issues. We have heard on the Floor of this Chamber today no less a person than Gerry Adams saying that he accepts Mark Durkan's argument of the past two years that the DUP has a veto on the devolution of policing and justice. Alex Maskey said to the people of the North two weeks ago that there would be devolution in May because the

British Government had legislated for it to happen. Two weeks later, Sinn Féin is conceding that that is not the case. Although Sinn Féin secured legislation that gave the Secretary of State the power to define the model of devolution, it failed in its negotiations to take away the triple-lock veto that the DUP negotiated before then.

3.00 pm

Therefore, if parties are to continue to negotiate, the DUP must accept that Peter Robinson has stated that the devolution of policing and justice powers is “no big move” for unionists. The DUP must recognise that it is inconsistent to share political power and the responsibility for policing while resisting the devolution of justice powers.

For once, Sinn Féin must be honest with its constituents — if not the entire community in the North — about the true nature of the debate. I want to put down some markers, not about the timing of devolution of justice, but about the nature of it when it happens. Despite all the good that will come from the Assembly having the power to legislate for the needs of its people, black holes exist in the platform for the devolution of justice.

The first and largest black hole is the lack of additional oversight of MI5, which will be no more accountable for its actions in the North than in Britain. That will come back to haunt the Assembly.

The second black hole will be created when, on 1 April 2008, the Assets Recovery Agency in the North will be abolished and the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) will take over its responsibilities. In the fullness of time, SOCA's energy and resources will drift towards dealing with the international threat and not the domestic threat of organised crime that endures in this part of Ireland.

Even if policing and justice powers were to be devolved on 1 May or at the end of May 2008, a third black hole will appear. At the moment of devolution, the North/South justice agreement will fall, leaving the citizens of the North and South of this island vulnerable, because the shared strategies to address justice issues, including the protection of vulnerable adults and children, will have disappeared.

A fourth black hole will be created because, despite what the Committee has said, two of the parties in the Chamber will, sooner or later, take power away from the policing structures and centralise it in Assembly Committees and Ministries. In doing so, they will rewrite Patten and upset the delicate balance of relationships with the police in this part of Ireland, which many have struggled for so long to achieve. I warn against allowing that to happen.

Martina Anderson rightly berated the DUP for its inconsistent strategy, whereby it is willing to share policing and political powers but refuses to share

justice powers. I would credit that argument with more sincerity had Martina Anderson not proceeded to highlight the inconsistency in Sinn Féin's argument. I ask people to read a submission from the family of Robert McCartney on page 86 of volume 2 of the Committee's report. The family made the submission last autumn, but it could have been repeated every month since:

"the continued refusal of Sinn Féin to cooperate with the PSNI in relation to Robert's murder signals an 'à la carte' approach to policing."

An à la carte approach to policing, justice or political responsibility must not be allowed to exist in the Chamber — and Sinn Féin must face up to that.

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

Mr Simpson: It is only fitting that I echo other Members' acknowledgement of the work of the Committee, its staff and outgoing Chairman. Members who read the Committee's report will see what a good job he did. I welcome my colleague Jimmy Spratt to his new position as Chairman of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

A major reality check is required, and many outstanding matters continue to raise questions that demand urgent answers. As I read, the text of the report makes it clear that public confidence is required before policing and justice powers can be devolved — a point that many Members made during the debate.

It is also evident that it will not be the NIO, but local politicians, who will decide whether sufficient public confidence exists when they are convinced that it does. That will occur, not because the NIO points at statistics and pie charts, but through interaction between local politicians and their constituents over time.

Several factors would assist the creation of that confidence. Among them is the question of the law-abiding character of republicans, how they demonstrate that, and their willingness to live side by side with their Protestant and unionist neighbours. Other matters include the so-called army council; a resolution on attacks on Orange Halls, the communities that use them, and Orange parades; proper co-operation with the police, such as giving evidence and encouraging people to join the police.

Other issues relate to the proper, efficient and coherent working of the Executive. That raises questions of the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party. Those parties have set out to create instability in the Executive over the Budget and the Programme for Government. Can the Assembly really imagine policing and justice being devolved into that kind of atmosphere? Certain parties must take serious steps before those powers can be devolved.

Other factors that emerge from the report must also be highlighted. I refer particularly to a range of matters on which parties are still a long way from agreement. The Assembly could never progress towards devolution of those matters without further discussion. Three of the ministerial options that are identified in the report depend entirely on a joint nomination by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. Recommendation 19 simply refers to the need for further discussions between political parties. What happens if there is no agreed position from OFMDFM? What happens if a single party does not reach agreement?

What happens if parties cannot agree on recommendation 20 — on the number of Departments? The Assembly is faced with the same problem with regard to recommendation 21 and the appointment of the Attorney General; recommendation 35 and the independence of the Court Service; recommendation 38 on North/South matters; and recommendation 40 on financial provisions. The Assembly could discuss those matters all afternoon. All of them are dependent on agreement after further political negotiations. While no agreement exists on any or all of those matters, how can the Assembly contemplate devolving those powers?

Let me turn to other considerations. Recommendation 30 states:

"appointments to the Office of the Police Ombudsman should be examined by political parties, initially, before the devolution of policing and justice matters."

It does not say that agreement must be reached, but only that matters that relate to appointments should be examined initially. Should the Assembly devolve those powers with such matters still outstanding?

Much work still needs to be done. There is too little clarity, too many outstanding matters, too great an amount of work for republicans still to do, and too few people have the confidence to move forward with the devolution of those powers.

Alex Maskey said that Sinn Féin had taken the "historic decision" to join the Policing Board and the DPPs. Does he want a medal for that? Considering the 35 to 40 years of hell on earth that was perpetrated against the people on both sides of the community, Sinn Féin's support for policing is long overdue. More evidence of that support is required, rather than the organisation that they represent blowing police officers' brains out on a weekly basis. It was regrettable that he had to say that.

The devolution of policing and justice powers is a long way off.

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

Lord Morrow: This has been an interesting debate, if only for the fact that there has been a finger-pointing exercise across the whole House. We have been urged

by some Members to say that the devolution of policing and justice powers should take place tomorrow. However, a number of reasons have been given as to why those powers should not be devolved. Those reasons were given not only by the DUP, but — significantly — by the SDLP, the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party.

I was struck by what Alex Attwood said. He was at pains to quote that the McCartney family had said in its submission to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee:

“the continued refusal of Sinn Féin to cooperate with the PSNI in relation to Robert’s murder signals an ‘a la carte’ approach to policing.”

I was pleased that he referred to that. However, I am not sure whether he advocated what they said as a reason that policing and justice powers should be devolved, or whether he used it as an example of why those powers should not be devolved. What conclusion does he draw from what they said? That is one of the reasons why powers should not be devolved.

Policing and justice powers will not be devolved unless, and until, all parties sign up to abide by the rule of law and order, which is a simple issue. However, alas, that is not the case, because there are parties in the Assembly that claim to be democrats, but, frankly, are quite happy to take on the mantle of being something other than that when it suits them. It is like running with a hare and hunting with a hound. I once said that putting Sinn Féin in charge of policing would be:

“the equivalent of putting a fox in charge of the chicken coop.”

It would not be long until they would be in propping and taking a few for themselves, as the saying goes.

Mr Durkan and Mr Attwood should set aside their self-righteous mantle and stop giving prolific lectures, particularly to the unionist community and its representatives. They say that we are holding up progress on the devolution of policing and justice and that we are not allowing it to happen. For once, they have got it right; that is what we are doing, and we will continue to do so.

I suspect that policing and justice powers will not be devolved this year, during the term of this Assembly and maybe not even in the lifetime of anyone in the Chamber today. People may question why I say that. The answer is simple; it is because I listen to and watch the antics of the Provos and Sinn Féin. They play a sort of fast-and-loose game. One day, they are great democrats, and the next day, they are street fighters who will cover up for, and give assistance to, those who carry out deadly deeds.

3.15 pm

How many Sinn Féin Members have, to date, gone to their local PSNI station and given all the information that they have about the brutal slaughter of Paul Quinn? Some of them, however, went and talked to the IRA.

Who is in charge of security here? Is it the local Provos in south Armagh, who control that area with an iron fist? Or is it the local PSNI? One day, Sinn Féin says that it backs the police. The next day, Sinn Féin Members stand up, pontificate, and say that Paul Quinn was not murdered by the IRA. They must be —

Mr O’Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Lord Morrow: I will give way in a second or two.

Sinn Féin Members must be about the only people on this planet who believe that. If they think that that sort of rhetoric will instil confidence in the unionist community, not only are they not at the match; they are not even turning up.

Mr O’Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for giving way. I will ignore the rhetoric around what the Member said.

The garda detective in charge of the Paul Quinn murder investigation has stated that, in their inquiries — assisted by the PSNI — in the north and south Armagh areas, they have taken 1,200 statements and visited 400 homes. They were warmly invited into every one of those homes, which included republican homes.

Lord Morrow: What the Member said is contrary to what the Quinn family says about the murder of its — *[Interruption.]*

I did give way, and the Member got the opportunity to say what he wanted to. It was not very convincing, I might add.

The Quinn family would say something distinctly different. It is commonly known that the IRA is still very much in control of the south Armagh area. We — *[Interruption.]*

What about the McCartney family, then, if you did not kill Paul Quinn? Let us leave that issue there.

Let us go back to just a few days ago, to see how Sinn Féin builds confidence in the unionist community. Sinn Féin Members had the audacity to come into this Assembly and declare that they wanted to have a day to remember a very prominent lady; someone who had achieved great feats in Northern Ireland. They chose Mairéad Farrell — a bomber. She was a person who was taken out of society on her way to kill. Sinn Féin says that that is how it will instil confidence into the unionist community — by commemorating such people and holding them up as icons.

Sinn Féin has a long road yet to travel. It has more miles to go, and it has not been very convincing to date. If Sinn Féin thinks that giving a two-fingered sign to the unionist community at each and every opportunity is the way to instil confidence in unionist people, it must, please, start thinking differently.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Lord Morrow: Yes, I will.

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

Mr Storey: I was not quick enough.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (Mr McCartney): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé ag caint mar Leas-Chathaoirleach an choiste seo.

Before I reflect on the contributions to the debate, I want to acknowledge the skilful and professional way in which Jeffrey Donaldson, the former Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, conducted the proceedings of the Committee throughout this inquiry. For various reasons — as we have heard today throughout the debate — the devolution of policing and justice matters has been viewed by some as representing a risk to political developments. Others view it as providing an opportunity to secure political stability, so conducting the inquiry was always going to be a challenge.

I acknowledge that Jeffrey Donaldson, as Chairperson of the Committee, always showed the utmost respect to Committee members, and to witnesses who appeared before the Committee. On behalf of the rest of the Committee, I welcome his successor, the Member for South Belfast Mr Jimmy Spratt. I hope that he will emulate his party colleague.

I congratulate him on his appointment, and — dare I say it — he has made an admirable start. He came in blind over the weekend, but judging by the way that he guided us through the debate this morning, I have no doubt that he will continue the good work that Jeffrey Donaldson has been doing.

He rightly acknowledged the valuable contribution made by Committee members and those who gave written and oral evidence. There was also a telling contribution from Assembly staff, who did much to assist the Committee in its deliberations. The Assembly's Research and Library Service provided excellent papers, and the Committee Clerk and his staff kept members fully informed and fully focused on the task, thereby ensuring that the Committee was able to report to the Assembly on time. I thank them for their professionalism, good nature and willing assistance. I am not sure whether patience is included in either the essential or desirable criteria for the job, but staff certainly showed patience in large measure.

We have heard a range of views expressed today, and I thank Members for their participation in the debate. It is not my intention to detail or summarise their contributions, except to say that over 21 Members contributed, and that there were three interventions, with a failed fourth attempt at an intervention at the end of the debate.

I want to address a point made by Dr Farry, and by his party colleague Sean Neeson. From the beginning, we realised that there was no one from the Alliance Party or the PUP on the Committee. Through the Chairperson, members ensured that representatives from those parties were asked to give evidence. David Ford and Stephen Farry provided evidence on behalf of the Alliance Party, and Dawn Purvis, Stewart Finn and David Rose provided evidence on behalf of the PUP. We welcomed their input, and that was our contribution towards ensuring that their voices were heard.

This morning, Stephen Farry projected to a time when the Alliance Party would be in Government — I think his words were “Our day will come.” I have heard him use the Irish language in the Chamber in the past. The Irish for “Our day will come” is —

Dr Farry: Tiocfaidh ár lá

Mr McCartney: Thanks very much.

All Members acknowledged the work that the Committee carried out, and no one spoke against any of the recommendations. It is also worth noting that Members took the time to read the very detailed and lengthy report. The merit star again goes to Mervyn Storey, who was able to quote from the report, line by line. We will have to be careful about what we say in the future, because he is certainly listening.

There were other common themes today. Everyone who spoke agreed that powers should be devolved — I do not think that anyone said otherwise. There was recognition of the benefits of locally elected representatives dealing with matters of justice and law and order. Alan McFarland mentioned some particular issues about which the public are concerned.

Members also recognised that effective governance measures are already in place in the Policing Board, the DPPs and so on, and that will add to the arrangements that we are working on now. There are budgetary issues, and the Committee accepted that those are, and will remain, fundamental to any transfer decisions.

There were some frustrations about issues that are not dealt with in the report — the number of Ministers, the timing and so on — but we did the work that we had to do. There can be a tendency towards a selective reading of the recommendations, and that was evident today in the reading of recommendation 41. I urge Members, when reading the recommendations, to also read the preceding paragraphs and to consider the report in general.

During the inquiry, the Committee heard that the “system” is already standing ready to give effect to the smooth transfer of policing and justice matters, should the Assembly request that transfer. Although the debate today confirms that there are different views about

when that will happen, nevertheless, much work has already been carried out.

In his remarks this morning, the Chairperson rightly highlighted the fact that a significant part of the report deals with structure, relationships, governance and accountability in circumstances where policing and justice matters might be devolved. Indeed, the report contains a range of matters on which further work needs to be done. Although some of that work is administrative and can be addressed before or after the devolution of policing and justice matters, other aspects can be addressed only through discussion among the political parties. Common themes emerged around recommendations 19, 20, 40 and 41, and Members asked how we can take those forward. The answer is — through further discussion among the political parties.

Therefore, it is evident that the onus now rests on the political parties to build on the work that has been done so far by entering into discussions to reach agreement on the outstanding matters that are clearly identified in the report.

I commend the report to the House. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee relating to the devolution of policing and justice matters, and agrees that, as required by section 18 of the Northern Ireland (St. Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, it should be submitted to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, before 27 March 2008, as a report of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Adjourned at 3.25 pm.

Committee Stages

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

28 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
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Fra McCann
Mrs Claire McGill
Miss Michelle McIlveen

Witnesses:

Mr Kieran Doyle	}	Department for Social Development
Mr Seamus Murray		

The Chairperson (Mr Campbell): We now proceed to the Charities Bill Committee Stage clause-by-clause scrutiny, which I know everyone has been waiting for. I am sure that there will be tablets to keep everyone awake. We are joined by Seamus Murray and Kieran Doyle; you are very welcome, gentlemen.

Committee staff should have circulated further information from the Evangelical Alliance in relation to the public-benefit test. At last week's briefing, the Committee asked the Evangelical Alliance to give further thought to how spiritual and tangible benefits could be recognised in the legislation; the Presbyterian delegation have talked about that today. The Evangelical Alliance correspondence should be considered when we reach clause 3.

Mr Seamus Murray (Department for Social Development): What process would you like to follow?

The Chairperson: In order to get through the Bill in a systematic fashion, I would prefer to simply start at the beginning, conclude and contain the remarks pertaining to each individual clause, park it, and then proceed to the subsequent clause, rather than return to

repeated issues. Hopefully, each of the clauses can be dealt with compartmentally, and that may speed up our deliberations. Clause 1 is always a good place to start.

Mr Murray: Part 1 of the Bill deals with the meaning of "charitable purpose". From the comments that have been made in the various evidence sessions that the Committee has taken to date, there seems to be a general consensus on a broad definition of what a charity is. The focus seems to be on the meanings of "charitable purpose" given in clause 2, which lists the various headings. In particular, that focus has centred around the definition of "religion". I refer members to clause 2(2)(c), "the advancement of religion", and to the breakdown of that in clause 2(3)(a).

The headings themselves are an expansion of the original four Pemsel headings, which form the definition of "charitable purpose" that is accepted across the UK and used as the basis for the definition of "charity". In effect, nothing really new is being introduced in the Bill — there is no new definition of "charity". The headings in clause 2 are an expansion, a clarification and a modernisation of those original four headings.

During the consultation process we took account of suggestions, recommendations and thoughts concerning how we might provide that clarification of the words therein. In the evidence sessions, the one issue to which there has been most response is the use of the word "religion". The definition that we have included is based on consultation with the Churches — in fact, the form of words used is one that was suggested by the Churches during that consultation. I acknowledge the point, made earlier by Rev Watts, concerning the definition of religion as involving:

"belief in more than one god".

We will certainly consider his comments regarding that. We have sought, as far as possible, to make sure there is a level playing field; as always, people may suggest that we could possibly go that bit further and provide a wider, more expansive definition, but if that were applied to each particular clause, we would end up with a very large, substantial Bill. So, while providing that clarity, we have also tried to keep it at a level which is concise enough to provide a definition in legal terms.

The Chairperson: On the issue of "one god" as opposed to "more than one god", is there a problem in simply making that change, which seems straightforward? Saying "one god or more than one" would accommodate the substantial number of people whose belief is that there is one god, as well as the small number of people who believe that there is more than one.

Mr Murray: That would be a technical change and would have no impact on the legality of the Bill.

Ms Lo: I am concerned by the reference to a belief in god, because there are religions that do not have a god.

Mr Murray: The Bill goes on to say that:

“religion” includes: “any analogous philosophical belief (whether or not involving a belief in a god)”.

Therefore, there is a wide playing field. Although some concern was raised about that in the consultation responses, it is not for the state to determine what constitutes a religion.

The Chairperson: How will “amateur sport” be defined in the Bill?

Mr Murray: Again, we have followed the definition of “amateur sport” that is in the corresponding legislation from Scotland, and England and Wales. Some responses in the consultation suggested that we use a broader definition such as the European definition of “sport”. However, if the definition of “sport” were different in Northern Ireland to the rest of the UK, there could be tax implications. Therefore, we must be consistent in our approach.

The Chairperson: Is the definition of “sport” the same in England and Wales as it is in Scotland?

Mr Murray: Yes, it is.

The Chairperson: And we are adopting a similar approach?

Mr Murray: Yes, we are.

The other issue that was raised in some of the responses related to the Crown forces and armed forces. Previously, the charitable nature of the Crown forces and lifeguards has been recognised under charity law. In clause 2(4)(a) of the Bill, there is a reference to any previous acceptance of purposes that are:

“recognised as charitable purposes under existing charity law”.

The work of the Crown forces and the lifeguard and rescue services has always been recognised as having a charitable purpose, and that will be the same under this legislation. It is not explicitly stated in the Scottish legislation either.

The Chairperson: So there is a difference between the Scottish legislation and the legislation in England and Wales?

Mr Murray: There are differences, as one might expect because of devolution. However, the spirit and principle is the same in all the charities legislation across the UK because of the tax issue — there must be a degree of consistency.

The Chairperson: Is there a reason for the Scottish legislation’s being slightly different?

Mr Murray: They took a particular view in their consultation, and in their assessment of the consultation. In our process, the initial advisory panel

that was established to look at the issue suggested the approach that we have taken, and endorsed this approach during the consultation process.

The Chairperson: So the general thrust is the same.

Mr Kieran Doyle (Department for Social Development): The exact words used in the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005 are:

“advancement of public participation in sport ... sport means sport which involves physical skill and exertion”.

The difference is in the style of presentation — the themes and principles on the promotion of sport are the same in the legislation for England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: That definition is very similar to the one in our Bill, which states that “sport” will:

“promote health by involving physical or mental skill or exertion”.

Mr Doyle: The difference is the presentational styles in the different jurisdictions.

Mr Brady: There are sports that are specific to certain regions: for example, the GAA is not of much relevance in England or Wales, and shinty is a game that is specific to Scotland. Therefore, a definition involving physical exertion and participation applies to any sport — there does not have to be a specific definition of what the sport is.

Mr Murray: It also includes mental exertion — for example, in playing bridge.

The Chairperson: The Bill refers to “amateur sport”. The modern definition of “amateur” may be somewhat different from that of 30 or 40 years ago. Is there any intention to clarify what the word “amateur” means?

Mr Murray: There are several issues in the legislation on which the charity commission will have to provide interpretation, guidance and advice. It is impossible to provide within the legislation detailed definitions of the various aspects, so that will be up to the new charity commission. It will follow some of the tested practice of the Charity Commission for England and Wales and the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator, which have provided their own guidance.

The Chairperson: Therefore, one of the commission’s tasks will be to offer guidance?

Mr Murray: Yes, it will provide definitions.

The Chairperson: Are Members content with clauses 1 and 2?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: The public-benefit test in clause 3 has provoked several responses. Members may recall from previous evidence sessions that the Department took as

its example the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005, which includes a public-benefit test.

It is important to note that, although there is no public-benefit test, per se, in the English legislation, that responsibility has been passed to the Charity Commission for England and Wales, and it has recently completed consultation on how it might apply that test. Therefore, in all jurisdictions, whether it is in the legislation, as in Northern Ireland and Scotland, or whether it is the responsibility of the Charity Commission for England and Wales, there will be a test of public benefit. That will ensure that charities can show what they provide to the public and how they do it. The main concern has surrounded the guidance and how it will be applied. Again, it will be the responsibility of the charity commission to provide guidance. There will be consultation on that guidance, and that is reflected in the Bill.

The other side of the issue is that there is also disbenefit. There are two balancing measures. The Committee will have heard evidence about the meaning of “disbenefit”, and whether it might be better to use other terms such as “harm” or “detriment”. We will certainly consider whether another term would be better. Consultation was carried out recently by the Charity Commission for England and Wales, and some of the responses suggested that the terms “harm” or “detriment” might be more modern and might denote more easily understood concepts.

Essentially, disbenefits must be weighed up by the charity commission. For example, in the case of a private health clinic, the provision of health services is to the public benefit. However, if the clinic charges fees of a level that preclude public accessibility, there is a potential disbenefit. The onus would be on the charity commission to weigh up the matter to decide whether that clinic passes the public-benefit test. The test provides a way to measure the level of benefit.

The public-benefit test will probably not be an issue for the majority of charities in Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, it is important to have that safeguard, so that the commission can make a judgement about charities in the future.

The Chairperson: I think that you were present when the Presbyterian Church in Ireland gave evidence earlier, and you might have heard the issue of the public-benefit test raised. Has the Department looked at the possible effect on smaller religious groups that might find it difficult to pass a public-benefit test in future, due to their size?

Mr Murray: Religion is one of the charitable headings; it has been recognised in existing legislation as having a charitable purpose. Religion was one of the four Pemsel headings, so it is well embedded in legislation. It will be recognised in this Bill. On the

question of whether its public benefit might be challenged, it would be incumbent on someone to challenge externally whether religion is or is not a charitable purpose. If the purpose is accepted under this legislation — once it is passed — it will be very difficult for someone to prove that religion no longer meets the requirements of the legislation and, therefore, should be removed from it. In many cases, it will not be incumbent on the charity commission to make that judgement, other than to say whether a religion meets the legislation as constituted, and whether it meets the public-benefit test by providing a public benefit. The charity commission will not make moral judgements about whether matters are spiritually good; it will simply decide whether the legislative requirements are met.

Mr Cobain: The charity commission’s guidance will be as important as the legislation. Given that that guidance will set precedents for future court cases, will we have an opportunity to consider it?

Mr Murray: The guidance will have to be issued by the charity commission.

Mr Cobain: Will the Committee get to review that guidance?

Mr Murray: The charity commission’s guidance will be subject to consultation and, clearly, the Committee for Social Development will play a key role in that consultation process.

Mr Brady: The word “disbenefit” is not in common usage; where did it come from?

Mr Murray: It is probably a legal term.

Mr Brady: Probably?

Mr Murray: It is also used in Scottish legislation.

Mr Brady: Perhaps, it is a legal Scottish term.

Mr Cobain: It is a bit of Ulster Scots to keep the balance.

Mr Brady: It was just that I had never really —

Mr Doyle: It may have been used as a legal drafting term; however, it is used in the Charities Act 2006 and in the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005.

Mr Brady: It is not designed to aid comprehension.

The Chairperson: Much legislation is not.

Mr F McCann: Concerning special provisions about recreational charities and sports clubs, clause 5(3) states:

“A registered sports club established for charitable purposes is to be treated as not being so established, and accordingly cannot be a charity.”

Who or what would be affected by that?

The Chairperson: We are jumping ahead to another clause. Stick to the matter in hand, and we will come to that clause next but one. That will mean that we will not have to jump back and forward.

Mr Craig: Before we move on, is there any reason under the sun why spiritual benefit cannot be included in the public-benefit test?

Mr Murray: Clearly, we are still involved in the Bill's drafting and consultation process. If we start picking out bits and pieces in order to provide definitions, we will end up trying to provide the detail within the legislation itself, which will result in a cumbersome piece of legislation.

In addition, if members recommend that something be included in a particular part of the Bill, consideration must be given to how that impacts the rest of the legislation. The spirit — pardon the pun — is encapsulated in the legislation.

Mr Brady: There are 186 clauses, which, by definition, makes the Bill cumbersome. If additional elements, such as Jonathan's proposal to include spiritual benefit, were to be included in the Bill, how much more cumbersome could it get?

Mr Murray: If the Committee wishes, we can certainly consider that proposal and investigate whether it could be done and the impact that such a proposal might have on the rest of the legislation. It would be necessary to consult with our drafting people to determine whether there would be a knock-on effect.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 3? The Department will consider the spiritual element and report back to us.

Members indicated assent.

Ms Lo: The categories listed in clause 2(2)(j) — "youth, age, ill-health, disability, financial hardship or other disadvantage" — are some, but not all, of those listed in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Is there any reason why the other section 75 groups were left out?

Mr Murray: "Other disadvantage" covers all the other section 75 categories.

The Chairperson: That is an earlier clause.

Mr Murray: Clause 4 deals with the operation of the public benefit requirement. The charity commission will produce, and consult on, the necessary guidance on that. Some of the responses argue that all changes should be referred for consultation, but if only minor technical changes are required, it would be an inefficient use of resources to refer those changes for consultation. That should only be required when significant changes are proposed.

The Chairperson: You are probably aware that the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) has suggested a wording similar to the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005, regarding no material impact to the guidance. Has that been given consideration?

Mr Murray: Consideration is being given to including that change.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 4?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We are making good progress, although I hesitate to say that.

Mr Murray: Clause 5 deals with special provisions about recreational charities, sports clubs, and so forth. The existing legislation, in relation to recreational sports clubs, will be amended to reflect the new Charities Bill. The wording of the clause, as the member said, is cumbersome, but that is how those things are drafted.

Essentially, if a recreational sports club is constituted so that it has a private membership, it is not defined as being open to the public. Such clubs can still apply for certain relief, under a separate piece of legislation, but they cannot be considered charities because of the issue of the broader public benefit. Clubs with private members, because of their nature, exclude to some degree.

Members may recall that there was some correspondence from Donaghadee Sailing Club; and we had a very positive meeting with it. There are examples, in England and Wales, of similar sailing clubs having been recognised as charities. However, those clubs have slightly different constitutions that enable them to qualify as recognised charities. The Donaghadee Sailing Club is going to pursue that in its own right. Ultimately, it is down to the issue of public benefit, and the accessibility to the service or the sporting activity that a club provides.

The Chairperson: Is the club aware of the current drafting of this section?

Mr Murray: Yes.

The Chairperson: Is it content?

Mr Murray: It is content with how we intend to take that issue forward.

Mr F McCann: Does this clause only affect or impact clubs with private memberships?

Mr Murray: The clause affects any sporting club that, constitutionally, restricts or excludes broader public access to it. Any recreational or sporting club, by its nature, could claim to be open for anyone to join, only to have barriers in place, such as charging

exorbitant fees, or a male-only membership. Those types of organisations do not operate for the benefit of the wider public and, therefore, do not qualify as a charity.

Mr F McCann: I am wary of anything that is so broad; it does not specifically mention clubs with private memberships. There are sports clubs set up in different areas to deal with specific issues. Those clubs may start off as temporary organisations — it could be a football team or whatever — but end up running forever. They may fall under the provisions of this clause because they do not fit in anywhere else.

Mr Murray: They will still qualify as charities if they fall under the heading of the promotion of amateur sport and meet the public benefit test. Presumably, those clubs would meet those criteria as they do not have exclusive memberships. Clause 5 deals with clubs that fall under another piece of legislation, and applies to those.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 5?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 6 provides for the establishment of the charity commission for Northern Ireland, and details the structure of that body in relation to the commissioners. It makes provision for a chief commissioner, a deputy chief commissioner, and up to five other commission members. The clause also sets out the requirement that at least one member be a legally qualified person, and provides some detail on what constitutes a legally qualified person. Are there any comments on that?

The Chairperson: Most people would probably suggest that a “legally qualified” person means a solicitor or someone in the legal profession. Have you considered specifying that in the legislation?

Mr Murray: It is specified in clause 6(6).

The Chairperson: Clause 6(4)(b) states:

“at least 1 member is legally qualified.”

Mr Murray: We considered whether more than one member should be legally qualified, but the commission is a small body. The appointment of the commissioners will go through the public appointment process, and criteria will be established. The appointments will follow due process: the posts will be publicly advertised, people will be invited to apply, and when the selection process is complete, the Minister will approve the appointments.

The Chairperson: There could be as many as seven appointments.

Mr Murray: To ensure a robust commission, the mix of skills, backgrounds and knowledge will form part of the criteria that will be established as part of the public appointment process.

Mr Cobain: Gender balance is a hobby horse of mine, and I want there to be a strong emphasis on that. To end up with five or seven male commissioners would be horrendous. It would not reflect society, and females get a raw deal when it comes to public appointments.

The Chairperson: That is ironic, Fred, but it is a relevant point nonetheless.

Mr Murray: Those involved in the public appointments process are aware of the need to increase female participation on boards across Northern Ireland. Interestingly, the Commissioner for Public Appointments recently gave a presentation to the Department in which she talked about how section 75 and the equality agenda relate to representation on boards. As we go through the public appointment process, we will be conscious of trying to get a gender mix.

Mr Cobain: Can nothing be added to ensure that that happens?

Mr Murray: To add anything further would simply duplicate the existing equality legislation and section 75.

The Chairperson: Will the make-up of the commission, as described in the Bill, be the same as set out in the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005, or are there differences?

Mr Murray: The Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) has more members, but we will look to it for the profile and background of what should constitute commissioners, particularly in relation to their role and function, and we will apply that to Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: How many legal professionals are in the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator?

Mr Murray: I am not sure.

Mr F McCann: Further to Fred’s point, is there a problem with reflecting what he said about ensuring a gender balance? To do so would clearly set out the rules of appointment, rather than waiting for someone to take an equality case against the commission.

The Chairperson: Would gender balance normally be stipulated in the Bill?

Mr Murray: Not to my knowledge. It is embodied in the existing terms for the public appointment process. The Commissioner for Public Appointments oversees and audits the process to ensure that it has been followed correctly.

Mr Cobain: The process could be followed correctly and still result in five male commissioners.

Mr Murray: There is the potential for that to happen, because it is a public appointment process. However, given that the process is merit-based, other issues could arise and cause difficulties. By following

the public appointments process, we meet the requirements.

The Chairperson: I take your point.

Ms Lo: It is also important that the board should not consist exclusively of lawyers. People from the charity sector are needed to sit on the commission, because they are in the business.

Mr Murray: That is down to setting out in the initial criteria the mix of skills required to ensure a functioning, efficient and effective commission.

Mr Cobain: We will wait and see what happens.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 6?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 7 simply seeks to outline the key objectives of the commission and its role, functions and nature. Clearly, the commission will first and foremost be a regulatory body. There are five objectives. The first is the public confidence objective, and the second is the public benefit objective, which deals with what charities provide to people in Northern Ireland. The third objective, the compliance objective, is about meeting the requirements of the legislation itself. The fourth objective is the charitable resources objective, which is about the commission promoting and overseeing how charities manage their resources. The accountability objective is about enhancing the accountability of charities to the general public and demonstrating how effectively they use the resources. The rest of the clause simply provides more detail on those objectives.

The Chairperson: The issue of the purpose of the commission, including valuing the importance of charities to civil society, was raised with the Committee. Has that been considered?

Mr Murray: Clause 9(2) reflects that: “the Commission must, in performing its functions, act in a way which is compatible with the encouragement of—

- (a) all forms of charitable giving, and
- (b) voluntary participation in charity work.”

That reflects its role in encouraging participation in charity work.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 7?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 8 defines the commission’s activity and work, which will involve determining whether an institution is a charity or not; improving the administration of charities; and investigation into misconduct, where required. Members will recall that part of the legislation deals with public collection certificates and licences. Importantly, it deals with

disseminating information in connection with charities and how they perform those functions for the general purpose. It also deals with the commission’s role and functions in making the public more aware of those. It is also about giving advice and information to the Department and to the Assembly on other activities and on the operation of the commission or the meeting of any of its objectives. That may well constitute an annual report that goes to the Minister and DSD and then through to the Assembly.

The Chairperson: What about the issue of the commission being both an adviser and a regulator?

Mr Murray: Concerns were raised about that in the evidence sessions. As members will know, the Charity Commission for England and Wales has performed that function efficiently for umpteen years, and it has done so to a very high standard.

The Chairperson: What about the situation in Scotland?

Mr Murray: In Scotland, the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator performs similar functions. There have been some suggestions about the operational side, which would involve different coloured guidance forms, as opposed to legislative regulatory requirements. That would make the two roles clear. Given that the commission will have the expertise in one place, it seems sensible that it should perform both functions. We also acknowledge that many bodies in the charitable and voluntary and community sector have a good deal of knowledge as well, and we hope that they will continue to perform that function.

Ms Lo: Bodies such as the Equality Commission have dual roles too, in that they monitor as well as advise.

The Chairperson: Yes; that is right.

Are members content with clause 8?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 9 deals with how the charity commission runs its business, the requirements on the commission to make best use of its own resources and its internal performance. I know that Mrs McGill had reflected some concern about the effective use of resources in the commission, and whether it had the potential to grow and expand beyond its role. This clause seeks to ensure that the commission uses the money that it receives effectively and efficiently in order to carry out its functions.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 9?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 10 deals with other areas in which the commission will perform its various functions. That may include issues such as a trustee’s

relationship to a charity or involvement in the administration of a charity.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 10?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 11 deals with the official custodian for charities in Northern Ireland. I suppose the best way to describe a custodian would be as a caretaker. Should a problem arise with a charity as regards administration, the commission has the power to appoint an official custodian to look after that charity in the interim period to ensure that the charity's assets are protected.

Ms Lo: Are you saying that an existing member of staff will adopt that additional role when necessary?

Mr Murray: The person appointed to act on behalf of the charity commission will not be a member of staff.

Mr Hilditch: Perhaps it has escaped my attention, but do any of the six clauses dealing with the commission indicate the length of the term that a commissioner will serve? Is that person appointed for life?

The Chairperson: Is the length of the term that a commissioner will serve specified in the schedule?

Mr Doyle: I will check whether that is covered under staffing; I do know that the commissioners appointed to the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator will serve a term of three years.

Mr Murray: The schedule states that the term will be five years.

The Chairperson: Is there a limit on the number of terms that a commissioner can serve?

Mr Murray: I am not sure whether that is specified; I will confirm that.

Mr Hilditch: Equally, how many terms can the chair and deputy chair serve?

The Chairperson: And, indeed, is there a limit on the number of terms that office holders can serve?

Mr Murray: I will check that also.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 11?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 12 deals with the charity tribunal for Northern Ireland. Members may recall from the previous evidence session that appeals made against charity commission decisions are initially reviewed by the commission itself — there is an evaluation of the process that led to that particular verdict. If people are still dissatisfied, they can appeal to the charity tribunal. That will be operated through the Northern Ireland Court Service, and it will

establish a panel to hear those appeals. No cost will be incurred in doing that — unless they decide to appoint a solicitor for themselves. So, importantly for charities, this is a non-fee process, which makes things much easier. We have worked closely with the Northern Ireland Court Service throughout this process, and it reflects the overall structure for tribunals established by the Court Service.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 12?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 13 relates to the role of the tribunal and how it will carry out its duties. A question was raised at a previous evidence session about the appointment of special advocates. We have consulted the Office of the Legislative Counsel on that matter, and there have been instances of special advocates being appointed. That can be done in the legislation, and we will consider how to factor that in

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 13?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 14 reflects, as does clause 15, the standard processes of the charity tribunal conducted through the Northern Ireland Court Service.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 14?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 15 deals, as does the previous clause, with the proceedings of the charity tribunal, specifically intervention by the Attorney General.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 15?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 16 concerns the register of charities. All bodies operating as charities under the law in Northern Ireland must be registered in the register of charities. That is critical in ensuring that there is full public accountability. The clause details what the register should contain — the names and details of the charities — and also provides the power for the charity commission to remove from the register any institution that it considers to be no longer functioning. The Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator sent letters to those charities listed by HM Revenue and Customs in order to establish whether those charities were still in operation. Interestingly, it was able to remove a significant number from the register because they appeared to no longer function.

The Chairperson: Is there a reference to charities in the register being granted designated religious charity (DRC) status or having DRC after their name?

Mr Murray: That point was raised during the evidence session, and having taken advice from the Office of the Legislative Counsel, we think that it can be reflected in that section.

The Chairperson: Will it be compulsory for a passporting regime for mutual recognition of charities?

Mr Murray: That is, perhaps, linked to clause 167, which deals with institutions that are not charities under the law of Northern Ireland. The Department considered that following representations from the Charity Commission for England and Wales. It highlighted some of the difficulties that it had experienced with charities that were established in England and Wales but also operated in Scotland. The Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005 states that those charities that operate in Scotland must be registered there. Therefore, some charities had to amend their constitution to enable them to do so in Scotland. Having considered that, the Department included clause 167, which provides for recognition of those charities that are registered in England, Wales or Scotland, but are still required to register in Northern Ireland. There will be a parallel register for those charities outlined in clause 167.

I hesitate to use the term “passporting” because that possibly suggests that you simply accept the bona fides coming straight across in a simplified form. It certainly does not remove the requirement to register, or to report and make a financial return to the charity commission in Northern Ireland in order to fulfil the public accountability aspect.

Ms Lo: Clause 16(2) states:

“Every institution which is a charity under the law of Northern Ireland must be registered in the register of charities.”

NICVA is querying whether that is worded strongly enough to ensure that every charity that operates in Northern Ireland will be required to register. The clause in the previous draft seemed more concise.

Mr Murray: The clause reflects previous comments about institutions outlined in clause 167. Clause 16 and clause 167 state that any charity that operates in Northern Ireland will be required to register and to make annual returns. There are no exceptions or exclusions with regard to that.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 16?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 17 outlines the requirements on the trustees of a charity to comply with the legislation and ensure full and correct registration. The Department is sensitive to the fact that feedback received has shown that some trustees of smaller charities are daunted by the obligations of meeting the requirement of the legislation placed upon them.

Nonetheless, to ensure public accountability, trustees of charities must comply with rules regarding registration, supplying of details and notification of a change of trustee. That is unavoidable, and the onus will be on the charity commission to provide advice and guidance on those matters.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 17?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 18 allows individuals the facility to apply to the charity commission with concerns about the registration of a charity or their name appearing on a charity. The charity commission should hear and consider concerns about names or addresses being shown on the register.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 18?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 19 places a requirement on charities to display the name of the charity, the reference and registration number, as recognised by the charity commission, on all headed notepaper, reports, and annual publications. Documents used by English-based charities always display the registration number. Again, that is to enhance public awareness and ensure public accountability, and allow the public to check that, if they so wish.

If the charity registration number does not appear, for example, when someone is collecting, that may raise a question of whether it is a bona fide charity.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 19?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Clause 20, which gives the charity commission the power to require a charity's name to be changed, was referred to by the representatives from the Presbyterian Church.

Mr Murray: This clause deals with several issues, the main one being duplication. If there are two charities with the same name, the Commission can require one of them to change its name, if that is considered necessary.

The clause also allows the charity commission to require a charity to change its name if that name is considered to be offensive. Interestingly, as Kieran mentioned earlier, there was the case recently of a charity in Scotland that had quite an offensive name. OSCR required it to be removed from the register because of the nature of the name. Therefore, that scenario does occur, and this clause gives the commission the power to deal with it.

The representatives from the Presbyterian Church were concerned about the multiplicity of charity names that include the word “Presbyterian”. I note the different examples of these that are listed in the submission; however, each organisation still has a distinct name, so I would not foresee any registration difficulties.

Ms Lo: You mentioned that OSCR actually deleted a charity from the register because it did not like the name or felt that it was offensive. Does that mean that the charity commission can request that a charity changes its name?

Mr Murray: Yes, it can.

Ms Lo: So if the charity does not want to do that, then it will be removed from the register?

The Chairperson: Presumably it is not just because the commission does not like the name, but because the name is perceived to be offensive.

Mr Doyle: In the Scottish case, the name was described as being very offensive to the general public.

The Chairperson: I do not think we will proceed down that route.

Are members content with clause 20?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 21 deals with instances where a charity is also a company. In that instance, if a charity is required to change its name for any particular reason, clearly there is a requirement for the company’s board of directors to effect that change also, and the clause reflects that requirement.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 21?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 22 provides an outline of the commission’s powers to institute inquiries where it has concerns about the operation of a charity, and how those powers should be applied. The commission may be able to appoint an individual — an accountant, a solicitor, or another person working in the legal profession — to act on its behalf and to carry out an investigation into the finances of the charity in question.

The Chairperson: Will you explain what is meant in subsection 5, where it mentions a 10-mile radius? What is that about?

Mr Murray: That is intended to limit the amount of expenses provided to the person who is appointed to carry out an inquiry, so that person is entitled to expenses only if he or she is required to travel more than 10 miles to conduct the inquiry.

The Chairperson: Is that something that is in place for most tribunals that are established?

Mr Murray: It is not a tribunal. It is an inquiry that will be carried out by someone — an accountant, for example — appointed to act on behalf of the commission.

The Chairperson: But the individual will be under the jurisdiction of the commission?

Mr Murray: Yes, the individual will be appointed by the commission to act on its behalf.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 22?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 23 details further the commission’s power to request documents, papers and evidence for an investigation or inquiry into a charity. It mirrors the nature of the legislation in place in England and Wales.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 23?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 24 sets out the powers that the commission will have to acquire information that would be disclosed to it in continuance of an investigation.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 24?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 25 is a cautionary clause for individuals who may believe that they can fool the commission in the information that they provide to it. It sets out the penalties that may apply to that and the action that may be taken against that.

The Chairperson: That would be a serious offence. Are members content with clause 25?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: That brings us to Part 6 and clause 26.

Mr Doyle: The term “cy-près” is a strange one. It is an old French-Norman word that means “as near as possible”. It is a legal scheme that the charities branch of the Department for Social Development uses to wind up charities or change their purpose. The Department currently deals with cases in which the net assets are less than £50,000. Above that, the case has to go to the High Court. The figure of £50,000 was set to assist charities. The cy-près principles in the Bill will mean the £50,000 limit’s being removed. The function of preparing the cy-près will move from the charities branch to the charity commission, which will have the power, as part of its general functions, to carry out all cy-près schemes. However, it will reserve the right to go to the High Court, particularly if there are potentially controversial circumstances.

The Chairperson: Does that mean that a case could go to the High Court whether it involved a relatively small sum or a significant sum?

Mr Doyle: Yes, that is correct.

Mr Murray: The key issue is that instead of having to go through the High Court, charities will now go through the charity commission, and the charities will make a saving on the process. That makes life easier for charities.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 26?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Doyle: Under clause 27, it will fall to the charity commission to decide how the cy-près is drawn up. Cy-près means “as near as possible”, so if, for example, the charity has a trust fund for a specific purpose, when the cy-près scheme is made, the net assets must be applied to purposes that are similar to the original spirit of the scheme.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 27?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Doyle: Cy-près can be quite a complicated area and it involves complex legal schemes being drafted up. Clause 28 contains various provisions to cover scenarios in which different inputs may come from different people. It deals with what the charity commission’s response should be to certain solicitations.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 28?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Clause 29; we are still on cy-près schemes.

Mr Doyle: Yes, it is quite a big area.

The Chairperson: As near as possible.

Mr Murray: Clause 29 further expands upon the nature of cy-près schemes, how those should be applied by the charity commission and the principles that underpin them.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 29?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 30 deals with charities that have been established by Royal Charter in England, of which there are a number. It is an aspect of cy-près that applies to a certain group of charities established under a slightly different format from others. It deals with the broader issue of cy-près, but for a particular group of charities.

The Chairperson: The Committee has not received any correspondence or communication on this issue. Members can draw their own conclusions from that. Are members content with clause 30?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Doyle: Under clause 31, the charity commission may, by order, exercise the same jurisdiction and powers that are exercisable by the High Court to establish a scheme; appoint, discharge or remove trustees; and vest or transfer property. It is basically the same type of legal powers that the High Court has.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 31?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 32 grants further expansion of the charity commission’s powers if it decides that it is necessary to alter how charity property is applied. If a charity ceases to operate, the commission will be able to make a decision on applying the charity’s property to a similar charity or, as Mr Doyle said, to a charity that has “as near as possible” the same nature and principal activities.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 32?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Members may recall that clause 33 is one of the clauses that raised concerns relating to the designation of religious status. If a religious body is successful in obtaining designated religious status, clauses 33 to 36 will not apply. Clause 33 relates to instances when the charity commission thinks that there is a need to intervene in a charity’s functions and processes because of concerns about maladministration or mismanagement. The clause, therefore, aims to protect the charity’s assets and its functioning. Clause 33 details the process for that. For religious charities, as members will recall, there is recognition and particular Government structures in place. If they receive that status, there is recognition of a process through which they will deal with this issue themselves.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 33?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 34 will be a last resort in most cases, but it provides the commission with the power to suspend a trustee or trustees of a charity when it is concerned that their actions are a risk to the operation of the charity’s business.

The Chairperson: Clause 34(1)(a) refers to a whole series of severe provisions in clause 33(1).

Mr Murray: There will be thorough investigations.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 34?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 35 follows from clause 34 in many respects. If there is a requirement to appoint an interim manager, for instance, to look after the charity's operation and to protect the business of the charity and its assets, the charity commission has the power to appoint someone to look after it while the investigation is ongoing.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 35?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 36 follows on from clauses 34 and 35 with regard to how the commission may handle the business of a charity if its trustees have been suspended or if it is the subject of an investigation. The commission may direct the charity in how to operate its business in order to safeguard it.

Ms Lo: Why are clauses 33 to 36 not applicable to charities that have designated religious status? You might have explained that to me already, but I cannot recall.

Mr Murray: The consultation process, particularly with the Churches, has led to a recognition that many of them have different governing structures in place. They have unique governing structures, which are underpinned, in many cases, by law. Rev Watts, from the Presbyterian Church, provided evidence to the Committee earlier this morning. His organisation has been established for umpteen years, and its constitution is 200 pages long. There is, therefore, a unique history and governance situation with regard to how the court structure within a Church operates and runs its business. Furthermore, some Churches have their own processes for investigating, suspending and dealing with cases of maladministration and misconduct. We recognise that that process is unique to them, and that is why those clauses and the designated religious status around those clauses acknowledge that.

Ms Lo: Is that sensible? You are saying that, where a Church has an untrustworthy trustee, under this legislation, he or she can continue as a trustee — because the Church has special status — until the Church itself deals with it.

Mr Murray: There are a number of things to be pointed out. One is that in granting designated religious status, beyond the existing criteria that we will talk about later, the charity commission has to be satisfied about the governance arrangements in place. That is one of the key issues in granting designated religious status; we need to be assured as to how the organisation deals with such matters.

It is also important to note that under this legislation, notwithstanding designated religious status, the charity commission still reserves the right, where it sees fit and appropriate, if it is dissatisfied about what has taken place, to carry out an investigation. Therefore, designated religious status is not a *carte blanche*. The charity commission will intervene if it sees that there is a problem or if you are not operating the governance processes correctly. So, there are safeguards in place which may address the concern that you have raised.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 36?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 37 follows on from that. If a charity is under investigation or there are concerns about it, the charity commission may, if it feels it to be appropriate, direct that its property be safeguarded or held in trust properly to protect the charity's assets.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 37?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 38 enables the commission to provide information to the charity about why it is taking various actions under the previous clauses.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 38?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 39 requires the commission, where it has taken action, to make it public knowledge so that people are aware that, in the case of an ex-charity, it has acted to suspend trustees or protect property. There might, for example, be a difficulty with a charity to which members of the public might want to make, or be making, donations. Therefore, it is important to make the public aware of difficulties and problems so they can decide whether they want to suspend their donations.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 39?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Doyle: Clause 40 states that the charity commission has the power to appoint or remove a trustee of a charity through:

“an order relating to the official custodian, or ... an order under section 33(1)(ii)”.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 40?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Committee members may recall an issue that arose, in relation to an earlier clause, about

the official custodian — a caretaker for a charity who looks after its property until the charity is dissolved or the property is disposed of. Clause 41 allows for removing the trusteeship of the property from the custodian at the point when that takes place.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 41?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 42 is self-explanatory. These are supplementary provisions that apply to the particular role of the custodian.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 42?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Doyle: Clause 43 is a provision to enable the charity commission to introduce orders to set up common investment funds. Charities that have funds can get authorisation or approval to put those moneys into certain investment funds.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 43?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Doyle: Clause 44 is the formal procedural guidance for drafting the schemes to establish a common deposit fund.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 44?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 45 details the Scottish and English legal definitions of “a charity”, because they are referred to in the previous clauses.

The Chairperson: I take it that those definitions are lifted directly from the legislation there?

Mr Murray: They are legal definitions.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 45?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 46 details an additional charity commission power concerning various charity property, and it follows on from previous clauses that deal with the protection of charities and their assets.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 46?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Doyle: If a charity does not have a specific power to make ex gratia payments under its constitution, the charity commission will have that power. Charities will be required to apply to the charity commission for authorisation or approval for such

payments, and clause 47 is the formal provision that enables that to happen.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 47?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Doyle: Clause 48 is a charity commission power that will enable it to make decisions, and give directions, about funds in dormant bank accounts. For example, if funds are held in the name of a charity that cannot be traced, or are lying dormant in an account, they might be directed to a similar charity.

Mr Murray: It is important to note that that would follow a proper investigation and attempts to track down the original charity’s trustees.

The Chairperson: Is there a defined timescale for reaching such a point?

Mr Murray: Clause 48(8)(a)(ii) refers to a period of five years.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 48?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 49 refers to the other role of the charity commission, which Ms Lo mentioned earlier. It will act as both a regulator and an adviser. This clause provide the commission with the power to give guidance.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 49?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Rev Watts’s point about membership is interesting. Clause 50 will allow the charity commission to check whether the membership claimed by a particular charity is bona fide and who the members are. It is a safeguard.

Ms Lo: Is there also a need to stipulate the minimum number of members required in order to constitute a charity? For example, if I set up a charity with only two members, would that pass the public-benefit test?

Mr Murray: That is not determined by the number of members. You, as an individual, could establish a charity. It is about the service that you provide. However, where you claim to have a membership of x people in order to demonstrate that your organisation is providing a public benefit, and we are concerned about whether your claims about what you were doing were bona fide and about how many members were involved, clause 50 provides the charity commission with the power to investigate those claims. Nevertheless, there is no rule that one must have x members. The public services provided by an

individual, or a group, can legitimately meet the public-benefit test.

The Chairperson: So, it is a safeguard against the situation where there is concern about a particular charity advertising the fact that it has x members in order to collect funds? Quite apart from the other checks, does this power enable the commission to confirm whether the charity actually has the number of members that it claims?

Mr Murray: It is a general safeguard for the public. People may make claims about the nature of a charity, or how big it is or its role or function. This clause expands the powers of the charity commission to check the backing of the charity and who is involved in it apart from its trustees.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 50?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Doyle: Clause 51 authorises the charity commission to hold any documents that are deposited with it by charities.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 51?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Murray: Clause 52 has raised concerns. Charities may reasonably be concerned at the cost of employing solicitors in relation to the performance of their functions. That was raised in the evidence session, and we have sought advice on it.

Mr Doyle: We checked the existing legislation. The origin of this clause is section 9 of the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 1964. That section has never been invoked in 40-odd years. The Solicitors (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 deals exclusively with solicitors' costs. We may, therefore, investigate this clause with the Court Service, which has particular responsibility for that piece of legislation, to see whether this is duplication. The clause requires further consideration.

The Chairperson: What happens when a dispute arises?

Mr Doyle: It will be dealt with under the 1976 Order. In that, there is provision for scrutiny of a solicitor's bill.

The Chairperson: Does that allow for a hearing to determine the facts of the case?

Mr Murray: Yes. Our concern is that we may be including a provision that is covered by other legislation. We do not want duplication.

Ms Lo: What if a charity buys a property, and gets a solicitor to deal with the conveyancing? Will the cost of that be taxed?

Mr Murray: No. This is where the charity commission is concerned about charges that a solicitor makes to a charity for a particular service. There is a process by which there can be a separate adjudication of the level of costs that have been applied.

Mr Cobain: It is not a tax.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 52?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We were scheduled to consider the Bill up to clause 52 today, so we can all regard that mission as accomplished. Thank you very much, Mr Doyle and Mr Murray. It has been a difficult Bill to go through, but the process has been informative and we have established a template for the rest of the Bill.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

28 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

Witnesses:

Mr Clive Knox	} Presbyterian Church in Ireland
Rev Dr Donald Watts	

The Chairperson (Mr Campbell): I welcome Rev Dr Donald Watts and Mr Clive Knox from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. We are pleased that you are here.

Rev Dr Donald Watts (Presbyterian Church in Ireland): Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland supports the thrust of the Charities Bill, feels that it is vitally important that appropriate safeguards are in place and wants to see that happen. It also supports the process that we have gone through to date; there was genuine consultation both by the Department and, later, by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Some changes appeared during that consultation.

One of those changes, and one that is very important to us, is designated religious status. I will explain why that is important to us, as one of the larger denominations. Initially, there was to have been a requirement to ask permission from the charities commissioner if an organisation were to make any change to its constitution. Our constitution has been evolving since 1840, and it is now a book of 200 pages. Changing it is a complex process, especially the basic part of it, which would take two years to change. Most of it is totally irrelevant to anything

that the charity commissioners would want to know about. Having to seek permission for any change to the constitution would have been so complex that it would have been almost impossible to operate. It would also have meant asking the charity commissioners about the appointment of new trustees, which is also a fairly complex process in the Church.

We are delighted that designated religious status has been brought into the Bill, as it is the only way to work that aspect of it. The Presbyterian Church would clearly have designated religious status, but we are concerned that some smaller denominations and para-church groups would not. Those groups may want to meet the Committee about that.

Our major reservation is that the Bill gives no definition of “public benefit”. We appreciate that such a definition would not normally be included on the face of the Bill, and that it will come forward later. We do not imagine that anyone would challenge the view that organised religion is of public benefit in Northern Ireland. However, the legislation will last for some time, and a time may come when people question the spiritual aspect of what we do, as opposed to the social and developmental aspects. As a Church, we can demonstrate public benefit, even if it is a narrow definition of social and developmental benefit. Given our beliefs, we argue firmly for recognition that spiritual nurture and development is also of public benefit. That is recognised in the new Bill that is going through in the Republic of Ireland, but it is not recognised in the Bill in the North.

I want to draw attention to another aspect of the Bill, which may be a drafting problem. The definition of “religion” in clause 2(3)(a)(i) includes “belief in more than one god”. The vast majority of people in Northern Ireland believe in one God, and they see that as what religion is. That was under discussion at the time of consultation, and the phrase that was used then was “one or more gods”. Perhaps the “one” has dropped out somewhere.

The Chairperson: I certainly hope that that is the case.

Rev Dr Donald Watts: I wanted to draw attention to that point.

Mr Clive Knox (Presbyterian Church in Ireland): The legislation provides that the commission should have the power to change a charity’s name. A number of organisations in Northern Ireland use the word “Presbyterian” in their name, including the Presbyterian Mutual Society, the Presbyterian Housing Association, the Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland and the Presbyterian Orphan and Children’s Society. Some of those have an association with the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, and some have separate legal structures. We are concerned that the

public perception might be that the inclusion of the word “Presbyterian” in their titles means that all those organisations are associated with the Presbyterian Church. We would like some reassurance that a change of name will not be enforced, and that we can continue to use the word “Presbyterian”.

Turning to the issue of annual statements of accounts, which is in clause 65 of the Bill, we note that the charity trustees are required to:

“prepare in respect of each financial year of the charity a statement of accounts complying with such requirements as to its form and contents as may be prescribed by ... the Department.”

We are, therefore, unsure at present what form the accounts will take. While we would obviously support a high level of transparency and accountability — and I believe that we have already demonstrated that by preparing accounts for the past three years in accordance with the statement of recommended practice issued by the Charity Commission for England and Wales, and by obtaining a true and fair audit opinion of our accounts — we are concerned about the impact that that might have on some of our congregations and what this prescribed format might be.

The Bill also provides for three stages of auditing requirements, with a lower limit of £100,000 for preparing receipts and payments accounts. As a charity, we benefit from bequests from time to time and we are concerned that, if a substantial bequest was received, that might mean a charity moving from one category to another for just that year before having to move back. That might have implications for their reporting requirements.

Our intention is to seek to register the central Presbyterian Church in Ireland as one charity and each congregation as a separate, individual charity. At present, each congregation of the Church has a charity number with HM Revenue and Customs, and it is our intention to follow that through with the charities legislation. We are seeking reassurance that the Department for Social Development, through the legislation, will not seek to impose a single registration, because that would have significant practical implications for us in trying to pull everything together. We understand that different denominations may take a different approach to this issue.

My penultimate point is to do with the registration of charity trustees, which we think will be required under the legislation. We are unsure what that will mean for the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Yes, the Church has trustees, but they probably do not have the same roles and responsibilities as trustees in other organisations. They are largely bearer trustees, holding titles to properties and suchlike. The general assembly, the Church’s governing body, has about 1,200 members; we hope that we will not be required to register all 1,200 as trustees. Therefore, it would be

helpful to have some indication of what registration of trustees will mean in our case.

Registration will also have implications for individual charities as to who will be regarded as trustees in an individual congregational setting. There are two committees that oversee the affairs of a congregation: the kirk session and the congregational committee.

My final point concerns the designation of religious charities. We welcome that exemption, which we understood would extend to the annual changes that we would make to our code, the law of the Church. However, according to clause 165, the exemption is from “Sections 33 to 36”, which cover the power to act for a charity, the power to suspend trustees, and the power to appoint interim managers. We do not feel that the assurance that was there is included in the Bill. We hope that we will not be in a position whereby we have to report to the charity commission every single change in our code every single year.

The Chairperson: Dr Watts, you referred at the outset to the “one god” issue. We are taking up the matter with the Department. Hopefully, we will get clarification, possibly even later this morning when we are talking to officials, and the matter can be dealt with satisfactorily.

As you pointed out, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland is one of the larger bodies. Owing to its tradition and history, it will be above the 1,000-member threshold and the 10-year threshold that are required to get designated religious charity status. However, a number of small religious groups and denominations will not meet those criteria. I know that it does not affect your Church, but do you have a view on those criteria? Is that of any consequence to you?

Rev Dr Donald Watts: We are concerned for those smaller groups. There are genuine religious groups that will probably not meet one or both of those criteria. However, somebody has to draw a line somewhere.

The Chairperson: Would you have any problems if that threshold were reduced?

Rev Dr Donald Watts: No.

Mr Brady: It seems reasonable to claim that a church, by definition, provides a benefit to the public. That seems to have been taken into account in the legislation that is going through in the South. Presumably, the reason that is not in the Bill is to bring the legislation into line with that in England, Scotland and Wales. I know that you do not think that the Department will make any changes to that, but what are your views on that rationale? It makes sense that churches, by definition, contribute to the public good.

Rev Dr Donald Watts: As you know, in the South, the legislation specifically says that religious purposes

are charitable. Our fear is not for today; I do not think that anyone would challenge the notion that churches are of benefit to the public. However, we are increasingly becoming, in an accelerated way, a much more secular society. There may come a day when people will want a more narrow definition of the term “public benefit”. Therefore, it is important that “public benefit” be defined in legislation now, rather than our having to start fighting in future for the right to be deemed to be providing a charitable service.

Mr Brady: So you are entering a caveat for the future.

Rev Dr Donald Watts: Yes.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that, owing to the pace of change towards the secularisation of society, if this Bill were to become law, the problem that you outlined could become a reality in five, six or seven years?

Rev Dr Donald Watts: The problem is probably not for us. We have a massive social witness department that runs homes for the elderly, alcohol rehabilitation units and so on. At that level, it is not an issue that affects us. However, the smaller groups that you talked about earlier, which may simply meet on a Sunday to worship, have some meetings during the week and have some outreach programmes for the immediate community, might have difficulties in showing that they have a major social or developmental aspect to their work. We want them to be protected with designated religious charity status. The underlying theology is that developing the spiritual lives of people around us is of public benefit, just as much as developing their physical or mental well-being.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, gentlemen. That has been useful and helpful to us in our deliberations.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

6 March 2008

CHARITIES BILL

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mickey Brady
Mr Thomas Burns
Mr Fred Cobain
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Fra McCann
Mrs Claire McGill
Miss Michelle McIlveen

Witnesses:

Mr Ronnie Douglas	}	Magheraknock Mission Hall
Mr Mark Gibson		
Mr Brian Agnew	}	Kingdom Life Faith Centre
Pastor David Goudy		
Pastor Nick Serb	}	Mount Zion Free Methodist Church
Pastor Lewis Smyth		
	}	Jordan Victory Church

The Acting Chairperson (Mr Cobain): I welcome Mr Douglas and Mr Gibson from Magheraknock Mission Hall.

Mr Ronnie Douglas (Magheraknock Mission Hall): Magheraknock Mission Hall has been in existence for approximately 80 years. Last year we rebuilt the hall. We are small in number, but we intend to reach out into the community and expand. We are a religious organisation and would like to be involved in the religious opt-out clause. We are concerned about the criteria for that — the 10-year rule and membership of at least 1,000 members — and would like to see them removed from the Charities Bill. We have charitable status, and we are dependant on that status to help with the overhead expenses of running the hall.

The Acting Chairperson: Is that your only concern?

Mr Douglas: Yes.

The Acting Chairperson: That is your main concern — like many small Churches.

Mr Douglas: Many of the small Churches do not meet the criteria. It would be sad to see some of those Churches losing out as a result. They are doing a fine job in rural areas. Belfast and the other cities would have no bother meeting the criteria. However, in rural areas, small mission halls, Baptist Churches and various other halls are very concerned about the criteria.

The Acting Chairperson: Would you be content if that clause were removed from the Bill, rather than amended in any way?

Mr Douglas: If possible, yes.

Ms Lo: Are you concerned about the membership criterion? Rather than having the clause removed, do you want that criterion taken out?

Mr Douglas: Either way.

Ms Lo: You are concerned about one of the four criteria.

The Acting Chairperson: Your charitable status will remain.

Mr Douglas: Our charitable status will remain. However, young Churches or mission halls starting up in rural areas could never meet the criteria. We cannot meet the criteria at the minute.

The Acting Chairperson: Is it too much of an inhibitor?

Mr Douglas: Yes. In days of old, many rural Churches were run on pennies and with few people. However, keeping rural Churches going today involves a lot of overhead expenses. Everything must be taken into consideration, and everything is a help.

Mr Brady: Does your membership fluctuate, or do you have a steady membership that could increase?

Mr Douglas: It fluctuates.

Mr Brady: Would there be more people if there were functions or a mission?

Mr Douglas: Yes. We would have more people when we hold a mission.

Mr Mark Gibson (Magheraknock Mission Hall): A single building will never meet the criteria anyway. What size of a building would be needed to hold 1,000 people? Every single mission hall in Northern Ireland will be ruled out, and all the individual Baptist Churches, which are not a conglomeration. Every single independent building and religious outreach will be ruled out.

The Acting Chairperson: Yes, because of the rule.

Mr Gibson: It is nonsensical. The big four main conglomerations will be the only Churches to hold the status. I do not know how many mission halls there are in Northern Ireland, but a multitude of them will lose out. I do not see the need for it.

Miss McIlveen: Is there a misunderstanding about the Charities Bill per se? Your mission hall will not be excluded from charitable status. This provision is to accommodate the governance arrangements of larger groups, so that they will not have to reapply and their governance arrangements will not be examined annually. My understanding is that your group's application to be recognised as a charity will not be affected; the provision relates only to the governance arrangements of larger Churches. I am concerned that smaller groups may have misunderstood the legislation, and they may think that they will not be eligible for charitable status.

Ms Lo: There are four criteria for designated religious status. A Church can still become a charity, but if it wants that special religious status, it must meet the four criteria. When a group becomes a charity, it gets the rate exemptions and the other benefits of being a charity. It may be a matter of principle that your group wishes to have that designated religious charitable status.

Mr Gibson: Why is that being removed? Why is it not being left as it is?

Ms Lo: It is not a matter of removing it. The special status means that the big Churches will not have to change their constitutions, and it gives them the leeway to appoint their own trustees. It does not mean that a Church will not have charitable status. A Church will get charitable status if it passes the public-benefit test. However, in order to get the special designated religious status, it must fulfil the additional four criteria.

The Acting Chairperson: Before we go any further, our researcher can give us more information. There are many misunderstandings of this issue, and many small Churches are concerned about it. Our researcher can give us a definitive view on the position of small Churches.

The Committee Researcher: Churches will not lose their charitable status. They will still have that status for the purposes of income tax, and they will be registered as charities with the charity commission. The provision will mainly affect what are referred to as the four main Churches, which have been operating for many years under their own governance arrangements. The charities commission will still be able to remove that designated religious status from them. For example, the commission could ask a Church to deal with a problem and, if it felt that the Church had not dealt with it properly, it would have the power to remove the designated religious status. The commission would then be able to appoint someone to sort out the problem, whatever it may be. The legislation will not make a difference to Churches' status as charities or to any of the benefits that go with that.

Mr Douglas: Our Church is currently registered as a charity. If we remain legal and above board — and, hopefully, that will always be the case with any charity — that charitable status should never be removed from it?

The Acting Chairperson: No. That is not an issue.

The Committee Researcher: That should not be an issue. In a way, it is protection for you. The commission's job is to protect the public and to protect you. If you were worried about anything, the commission could help you to sort it out. Removal of charitable status is unlikely to be an issue.

Mr F McCann: During the initial presentation on the Charities Bill, I asked a similar question in relation to the charitable status of community groups. I was told that this would not impact on them in any way. That seems to apply across the board.

The Acting Chairperson: There are many misunderstandings around that point. It is really about the four main Churches. They are up and running, and they have these governance arrangements in place. It is a governance issue; it has nothing to do with whether a Church can retain, or apply for, charitable status.

Mr Brady: You said, initially, that you understood that your establishment will not be affected. The point that we are making is that groups that might want to start up may be put off by the extra bureaucracy involved in trying to get off the ground. That is a valid point.

Mr Douglas: New halls or Churches struggle at the beginning, and that is when they need assistance. It is possible that that assistance might not be available.

Mr Brady: You said that it might stop new Churches from trying to start up.

Mr Douglas: Yes, that is possible.

Mr Burns: Many of the smaller Churches know that their buildings would not hold 1,000 people, and they think that that will rule them out of charitable status, but it will not. That message is not getting across to all of those Churches. Is there any way that the Committee could get that information to the Churches?

The Committee Clerk: Several weeks ago, the Committee agreed to send each of the religious organisations that had written in specifically about designated religious charity status a copy of the research paper relating to that clause. That is really as far as the Committee can go.

The Acting Chairperson: Perhaps that information could be put on the Committee's website, and people could access it there.

The Committee Clerk: The information has been published on the website. Also, we have sent a hard copy to those organisations.

Mr Burns: There seems to be a huge breakdown in information, and the Churches seem to have a huge fear that they will be excluded. There has been a misunderstanding.

Mr Douglas: Many Baptist Churches that do not meet the criteria have that fear.

The Acting Chairperson: Charitable status has nothing to do with having 1,000 members.

Mr Douglas: Has it not?

The Acting Chairperson: No. Anybody can apply for charitable status.

The Committee Researcher: The use of the opt-out clause is causing some confusion, and I know how it originated. There is no such thing as an opt-out clause for any of the Churches. They still have to apply for charitable status — which the Churches already have. It comes from the income tax. They can then go to the charity commission. They will be asked to furnish their accounts and financial activities throughout the year to the charity commission annually. The main problem arises if there is an issue. For example, the Church of Ireland has synod groups and vestries in each of its Churches. If anything goes wrong, that hierarchy should sort out the problem. The commission will offer you, as a smaller organisation, protection if you do not have the wherewithal to sort out the matter.

The Acting Chairperson: The Bill does not stop anyone from applying for charitable status. An individual can apply for charitable status. If I fitted the criteria for charitable status — and the criteria are listed in the information that was sent out — I could apply. It has nothing to do with the size of an organisation; that does not matter. There is a lot of misunderstanding around that. Anyone can apply.

Mr Gibson: Where did the 1,000 people come from?

The Acting Chairperson: That refers to designated religious charities. There are two different issues involved.

Ms Lo: It is an additional status.

The Acting Chairperson: Anyone can apply for charitable status. I could apply, provided I meet the criteria laid down. However, there is a designated status in the Bill for Churches with 1,000 members or more.

Ms Lo: They have a designated religious status.

Mr Gibson: Is there any difference between secular and religious organisations in the Charities Bill? Are they all the same?

The Acting Chairperson: Anyone who meets the criteria is entitled to form a charity.

Mr Douglas: When does the 10-year rule become applicable?

The Acting Chairperson: The 10-year rule relates to designated charities. Churches with 1,000 or more members —

Mr Douglas: I understood that a Church group has to be in existence for 10 years or more before it can —

The Acting Chairperson: No.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: Perhaps there is a misunderstanding. I will try to explain the situation as simply as possible. Any Church — or anyone — will be able to apply for charitable status. A Church will have to submit papers to the new commission, and, subject to those being satisfactory, that Church will then become a charity.

Large Churches can apply for a special designated status which prevents the commission from taking over their governance arrangements — unless the commission is sufficiently concerned that that has to happen. In order to prevent the commission from becoming involved in the governance arrangements, a Church has to be large enough to demonstrate that its arrangements are satisfactory. In other words, long-established governance arrangements have to be in place.

The basic criteria are that a Church must have at least 1,000 members and has to have been in existence for 10 years or more. If a Church meets those criteria, it can be granted special designated religious status, which means that the commission will not automatically become involved in its governance arrangements should any problem arise. However, at the end of the day, should the commission become sufficiently concerned, it can rescind the designated status and get involved.

Therefore, designated religious status is not to do with being a charity; it is to do with whether the commission will begin to interfere — for want of a better term — with a Church's governance arrangements. The Bill is not aimed at stopping groups from becoming charities.

The Acting Chairperson: I hope that is a bit clearer, Ronnie.

Mr Douglas: Yes, that has cleared the air somewhat.

Mr Gibson: Are you saying that it is simply an add-on for the four big Churches?

Mr Brady: It is more to do with governance; the four big Churches require more governance.

The Acting Chairperson: That is what the 1,000 members and the 10-year rule is about.

Mr Douglas: Therefore, it will not affect us at all.

Mrs McGill: It is my understanding that the groups that the witnesses represent cannot have designated religious status.

The Acting Chairperson: That is correct; they cannot.

Mrs McGill: Is that not a problem? Are you content with that?

Mr Gibson: The information that we got was that we would lose our charity status because we had fewer than 1,000 members and had existed for less than 10 years.

The Acting Chairperson: That is a different thing altogether. Anyone can form a charity, provided they meet the regulations. Only Churches that have 1,000 members or more and have been in existence for 10 years or more can get designated religious status.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: All charities are subject to the commission beginning to get involved in their governance arrangements, if the commission is sufficiently concerned about those arrangements. The only charities that have a certain degree of protection against that interference are the four large Churches.

That protection will exist only as long as the charity commission is prepared to grant them the designated religious status. It can be withdrawn at any time. The charity commission can say that it is sufficiently concerned and withdraw the special designated status. However, such a scenario would only occur in circumstances in which there is suspicion of criminal activity, fraud or abuse of the charitable status.

Mr Douglas: We are pleased to hear that charities will be scrutinised to ensure that they are being legally managed for the benefit of the community, rather than for the benefit of certain individuals.

Mr Gibson: We are happy enough.

The Acting Chairperson: Thank you for your time.

I now welcome the representatives from the four religious groups on behalf of the Committee.

Pastor Nick Serb (Mount Zion Free Methodist Church): I thank the Committee for taking the time to listen to us. From what I hear, you are willing to listen, which is important, and your time is much appreciated. I apologise for my accent. I am sure that Ms Lo is aware that I am a foreigner, and she knows what that is like. We are grateful to be here.

We want to raise a few issues. We represent different Churches and are pretty much independent of each other, but we speak with one voice. Each of us will talk about a part of the Charities Bill that concerns us. Although we are glad to be here, we are, at the same time, slightly disappointed, because someone decided not to issue us with an invitation to the preliminary consultation. Had that been done, we would not be here today.

I want to draw the Committee's attention to clause 22 of the Bill. I welcome the Bill, and the fact that it intends to regulate and control the financial aspect of how charities operate. That is positive: as I understand

it, the last charities Act in Northern Ireland was passed in 1964. It is about time that we had something new. Clause 22 provides that:

"The Commission may institute inquiries with regard to charities or a particular charity or class of charities, either generally or for particular purposes."

That is fine: we completely agree with that and it has to happen. The commission and the charity tribunal have to have some means of imposing the law on charities.

The witnesses who spoke before us touched a little on clauses 33 and 36, which are my main concern. Under clause 33:

"the Commission may of its own motion do one or more of the following things —

(i) by order suspend any person who is a trustee, charity trustee, officer, agent or employee of the charity ...

(vii) by order appoint (in accordance with section 35) an interim manager, who shall act as receiver and manager in respect of the property and affairs of the charity."

Those two items cause me some concern. Every individual is liable for prosecution under the law if he has done something wrong. The law is very clear. If the charity is a religious charity, and something goes wrong — for example, a fraud — clause 33 may be invoked. However, it overlooks something important, namely, Church discipline. It conflicts with what the Bible teaches us about what is to be done when someone in the congregation does something wrong.

Furthermore, if a manager is imposed and dictates in the finance or governance of the Church, that also overlooks an important thing: that anyone in any position in the Church needs to meet special spiritual, social, moral and educational requirements. The Good Book says so, not me:

"Likewise deacons"

— that is, trustees, treasurers, anyone who does anything in the Church —

"must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless."

So, what is the guarantee that the manager will fulfil those requirements? As a Church, we obey the law and we want to observe our Church's book of discipline. It says here that:

"Every church needs to have a good witness in the community. Every person needs to have a good witness."

We have no guarantee that the manager will fulfil the requirements. Therefore, the law contradicts the constitution of the Church and the Church has no other option but to disobey the law. That is a problem.

The Acting Chairperson: Presumably, someone will only be appointed by the charity commission if the people of the Church do not fulfil their duties.

Pastor Serb: I understand your point. However, as Mr Douglas said, this is direct interference in the governing of that Church. Each Church has a structure, and, whether the Church is large or small, each person is accountable to a board or committee. Large Churches are governed centrally, as well as locally, and in essence each local church has its own government.

The Acting Chairperson: That is predicated on what you have quoted. Perhaps Michelle can explain it better than I can.

Mr Brian Agnew (Kingdom Life Faith Centre): Ms Lo has mentioned the five criteria that must be met to obtain designated religious charity status. Three of those criteria are a template and have been well constructed by people who understand non-denominational Churches, which, in a sense, are independent Churches.

The requirements for a Church to advance religion as its principal purpose, and to regularly hold public worship as its principal activity — there is no problem there. Similarly, every Church that I am connected with satisfies the requirement to have an internal system of governance with supervisory and disciplinary functions and the requirement to audit accounts and keep records thereof.

The two criteria that we feel are discriminatory are the requirement for the Church to have at least 1,000 members over the age of 16 who live in Northern Ireland, and the requirement that the Church has been established for 10 years. That discriminates against non-denominational Churches. The 2001 census figures showed that 40·26% of those reporting a religion were Catholic, 20·69% Presbyterian, 15·3% Church of Ireland, 3·51% Methodist and 6·7% non-denominational. Those figures may be different today, and I imagine that non-denominational Churches comprise a larger percentage now, because independent and non-denominational Churches have come to the fore during the past decade.

As Pastor Serb has already said, we had no notification of those new criteria and found out almost by default. The establishment of the charity commission might solve that problem, but it should have been within the Assembly's power to find a list of charities in Northern Ireland, through consultation with the Inland Revenue or whatever. We do not know which groups are absent today, or from subsequent meetings, because they were not informed. That has resulted in our coming to the Committee on a bad footing and with some suspicion.

Earlier, someone use the term “misinformation”, and I think that there has been a certain amount of that. A lot of people think that this is going to affect

their charitable status, although we understand that that is not the case. However, looking back at communist Russia or some of those other countries — such as Romania, where Pastor Serb comes from — this could be perceived as the thin end of a wedge exercising control over evangelical, religious or Christian organisations. Why is there one rule for the denominational Churches and another for the non-denominational ones?

More than 6% of Churches are non-denominational, and that is a high percentage. That 6% is predominantly made up of small independent evangelical Churches whose whole ethos and mandate is based on the word of God. The thrust of their teaching is based upon local autonomous Churches run by local elders. We believe that smaller and local is better than big and older, and the same principle can be applied to the Assembly. If big and older is better, power should be handed back to Westminster. We do not believe that, and that it is why the country has a devolved Government. It is wonderful and awesome to hear local accents discussing local issues that apply to local people.

People may have put as many as 40 years of their lives, and their own finances, into particular religious organisations on the basis of belief in Church government, elders, leadership teams — whatever terminology is used in that particular organisation. There are forms of government there.

I have brought a copy of my Church's constitution, and my understanding is that Churches must have an internal constitution — including rules about eldership, leadership and governance — in order to achieve charitable status. Further to Nick Serb's point, our constitution stipulates that any manager must believe what we believe and have the same ethos. Technically speaking, an agnostic, an atheist or even a Satanist could be placed in governance over our group, which would be totally against our ethos and at variance with our aims and objectives. Those are some of our concerns. Bigger and older is not necessarily better, and that is why we are sitting here.

Miss McIlveen: Thank you for attending; I acknowledge that you have genuine concerns. In the event of your worst-case scenario of someone coming into your Church in order to deal with governance, it would be possible at that juncture for you to withdraw your application for charitable status, which would mean that no one could interfere.

The Acting Chairperson: The other point worth making here is that it was the Department for Social Development that was involved in the consultation — not the Assembly per se.

Mr F McCann: Members of this scrutiny Committee were the first people to point out that small Churches

might not have had a say about the matter, and that we should reach out to hear their opinions.

Mr Agnew: We very much appreciate that.

Pastor Serb: Would it not be easier and more logical for charities with designated religious status to operate under their own governance, which already obeys the Bible in relation to the law of the land? If anyone involved with Church governance were to disobey the law of the land, they would be subject to God's judgement. Therefore, those Churches should have designated religious status, and, if anything happens, that status can be removed at any time by the charity commission.

The Acting Chairperson: Do you mean all religious organisations, irrespective of size?

Pastor Serb: Yes.

The Acting Chairperson: Earlier, the point was made that awarding designated religious status to organisations with 1,000 or more members was related to governance. By definition, larger and longer-established Churches should have better governance systems than smaller organisations, which may have governance systems but not with as many people involved in governance.

Pastor David Goudy (Moir Pentecostal Church): We fully understand that our Churches' designations are nothing to do with charity status, but to do with governance. My problem is that the 10-year, 1,000-member rule appears to be arbitrary and discriminatory because it applies to bigger denominations, and I do not understand how those figures were arrived at. It appears that bigger and older is better and that that demonstrates a proven track record, which is not necessarily so. Our Church has had charitable status for 16 years, still has the same trustees and has undergone random checks by HM Revenue and Customs. We consider ourselves to be completely and utterly above board, and I do not understand why we should be treated differently from other denominations simply because we are smaller, which is discriminatory. If we properly govern ourselves, why should that be? If we had not governed ourselves properly, we could have dealt with the problem ourselves or HM Revenue and Customs could have intervened.

For example, our trustees had to buy our church building. We had to sign on the dotted line. If things had gone pear-shaped, apart from anything else, we would have suffered — personally, not as a denomination. That was a belt-and-braces matter for us.

This is also a belt-and-braces approach, because, as a charity, we will still be under the jurisdiction of HM Revenue and Customs, but we will also be under the jurisdiction of the new charity commission. The commission will be able to check us out at any

time. Therefore, I do not see why arbitrary rules about having 1,000 members and 10-year existence should even apply. Why not designate all Churches as religious charities, and, if a problem occurs, deal with it then, rather than separate us?

The Acting Chairperson: With respect, the issue of the numbers and the timescale being arbitrary was raised by the Committee. In fairness, that is one of the reasons why representatives of smaller Churches were asked to come along and give their views, which could be relayed to the Department. You have been given the opportunity to state your case, and your views will be passed on. No one is implying that a smaller Church has less governance, or that it is not well governed.

Pastor Goudy: That is what it seems like, though.

The Acting Chairperson: The Committee certainly does not take that view. It seems to be more a matter of the logistics of governance. It is my understanding, from evidence that the Committee has heard from officials and from other Churches, that it is not a question of saying that smaller Churches are less well governed than larger ones.

Pastor Goudy: If you agree that the size of a Church and its having been in existence for less than 10 years does not necessarily mean that it is badly run, what is the purpose of that legislation?

What is the track record of smaller non-denominational groups with regard to the misappropriation or misuse of funds or the abuse of power? Is there a track record of such behaviour? Why is the legislation being brought in? Having a safeguard for the public is fair, but why is it being brought in?

The Acting Chairperson: First, it is a matter of striking a balance. Secondly, there should be an inbuilt element of protection for the public. The points that you make will be taken on board and passed on. You have demonstrated that smaller Churches have genuine fears about being discriminated against.

Pastor Goudy: It looks as though we are being discriminated against in comparison to the four big Churches. That is very unfair.

The Acting Chairperson: The points on designated religious status have been well made, and the Committee will pass them on to the Department. The numbers of members required and the timescale are felt to be arbitrary. A good point was made by Magheraknock Mission Hall that the amount of bureaucracy may prevent smaller groups from starting up.

Pastor Goudy: We would feel happier if those two requirements were removed. If all Churches were on a level footing, we would have no problem with the rest of the Bill.

The Acting Chairperson: Your views on that will certainly be passed on.

Ms Lo: I agree with Pastor Goudy. The whole idea of designated religious status criteria is divisive. It creates a hierarchy of Churches in the eyes of the state.

Mr Agnew: That is right.

Ms Lo: The main Churches were consulted, and they came up with those requirements. What about the other Churches? They were never consulted. We need to look at that issue seriously.

The Acting Chairperson: In fairness, the smaller Churches have been invited here because the Committee felt that their voices were not being heard in the way in which they should have been heard during the consultation. They may all have had fears about the points that have been made today about the possible discrimination. Anna made a good point about a hierarchy of Churches being established.

Mr Agnew: This issue affects over 100,000 people who are non-denominational — it is a large minority.

Pastor Lewis Smyth (Jordan Victory Church): I received the Research Services briefing note on designated religious status. It says: “To take the example of what are referred to as ‘the four main churches’ in Northern Ireland, all have central governing bodies to regulate their finances, assets and disciplinary procedures. They also have elected governing bodies from within their membership. It is feasible therefore to assume, at least in the first instance, that they can govern themselves and have mechanisms in place that provide accountability to their members.”

Assumptions are an internal and subjective part of how people look at life. On the same assumption, therefore, I can say — because of how that document is worded — that the Committee assumes that Churches with less than 1,000 members cannot govern themselves, and do not have such policies in place. This has not been merely overlooked; it has been written very clearly that the Charities Bill — and the people who formulated it — already assume that the Churches with smaller memberships cannot, and do not, have those mechanisms. If it is felt that smaller Churches are not fulfilling the necessary criteria, and are insufficient in governance, it would be more helpful if the Committee set out principles for us to adhere to in that regard.

There is also an opt-out clause, but we are not necessarily going to opt out like the four main Churches. Clauses 130 and 131 of the Charities Bill concern public collections — door-to-door and business collections — and practices that are not permitted. I remind the Committee that the Church at large, including the small denominations, conduct

a lot of youth work and drug programmes without Government support. We fund those schemes ourselves, along with help from local businesses. We received £5,000 to help us to implement procedures in school training for children. This legislation will crush — not might crush, but will crush — a lot of community activity. Small local Churches strive to make a positive impact on their communities, so that is another point that I ask the Committee to consider.

The Acting Chairperson: You have reinforced the issue of public benefit, which is part of the Bill. There is no question of the smaller Churches’ contributing less to public benefit than the larger Churches. However, you have addressed perceptions and fears that the Committee will take on board. We will deal with those concerns to the best of our ability. The information that you have given us will be passed on, and the Committee will attempt to impact on what you have told us. That is why you were invited to give a presentation today. As a scrutiny Committee, we need to be informed by all strands of opinion, and not just by the larger Churches. I accept Pastor Goudy’s point that bigger is not necessarily better; that is just a perception. I thank you for your presentation.

Pastor Goudy: Can we assume that we will be kept in the loop now?

The Acting Chairperson: Yes. You will receive a copy of the report when it is published and will be kept informed of what is happening.

Pastor Smyth: Would it be feasible for the Committee, in co-operation with the Inland Revenue, to establish who the Church charities are? Those Churches could then receive a letter of explanation, rather than learning by default and having to scramble together a presentation at short notice. We met at 9.30 am today to put our minds together and prepare a presentation. We appreciate the Committee’s service but, like you, we are busy people. We would like a system that would set out the strategy or plan more clearly.

The Acting Chairperson: As a Committee, we scrutinise the Bill; contact with other statutory organisations, such as HM Revenue and Customs, is the remit of the Department. We will, however, relate your views on the matter to the Department.

Pastor Serb: The Free Methodist Church, like some of the other Churches, is part of a worldwide denomination. We have churches in England, and when we contacted them and HM Revenue and Customs, we realised that there were no conditions like these in England or Wales. The Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005 has some restrictions — in Scotland, the number is 3,000. I understand that charities must be protected. However, there are many other things that we must consider and review.

The Acting Chairperson: That is the purpose of the clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill. There are 186 clauses, and I am sure that you appreciate that we have to go through every clause in detail. The Committee is aware of your views and thoughts on that issue, and we will address those as we go through the Bill.

Pastor Smyth: With regard to a religious organisation demonstrating that it has a membership of not less than 1,000, how many independent Churches have been excluded? How many have been included in that figure? I think that it must be minimal. Has anyone researched that?

The Acting Chairperson: We are not in a position to answer that question. However, we can ask the Department to get that information for us. The Committee will take on board all the points that have been made today. Thank you for your presentation. We have found it very useful.

Mr Agnew: I should like to add one thing that may not be for this Committee; perhaps you can pass it on to the relevant powers that be. With regard to National Lottery funding, some representatives from Churches and religious organisations have told me recently that they have a conscience issue about accepting money for youth projects or whatever that has come from gambling. Personally, I do not have a problem with it, because when I get funding I put it to good use. However, the majority of Christian people do not want to take the money because they see it as filthy lucre, or whatever you want to call it.

The Assembly will be coming into receipt of funds from dormant bank accounts in the not-too-distant future. That money could be set aside to help fund projects for the Christian charities that have a problem conscience-wise in accepting money from the National Lottery. That issue may not be for this Committee, but we would appreciate it if that suggestion were passed on to the appropriate Committee.

The Acting Chairperson: We will certainly take note of your comments and bear that in mind. We are not in a position to make any definitive statement on that at the moment; it will depend on how much money is available and on how it will be designated to particular organisations or bodies.

Mr Agnew: I understand.

Pastor Goudy: I realise that we are running out of time. This is a large Bill, and you mentioned the many clauses that must be considered. When will the Bill be brought before the Assembly?

The Acting Chairperson: We are hoping to complete the clause-by-clause scrutiny by April.

The Committee Clerk: The Committee hopes to publish its report at the beginning of May. However, that is an indicative date; it is not set in stone. If that is

the case, it may well be brought before the Assembly before the summer recess. Those are the timings at the moment, but they could change.

Pastor Goudy: Is there still time for other groupings to provide evidence?

The Committee Clerk: We put advertisements in the newspapers and we contacted different religious organisations and invited them to give oral evidence to the Committee. We must draw the line somewhere. However, it would be up to the Committee if it felt that there was a particular issue that it wished to pursue.

Pastor Goudy: It would probably be the same arguments.

The Acting Chairperson: Thank you very much.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

6 March 2008

CHARITIES BILL

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mickey Brady
Mr Thomas Burns
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Fra McCann
Mrs Claire McGill
Miss Michelle McIlveen

Witnesses:

Mr Kieran Doyle	} Department for Social Development
Mr Roy McGivern	

The Acting Chairperson (Mr Brady): I welcome you on behalf of the Committee. This Bill has 186 clauses and nine substantial schedules. We dealt with many of the clauses, such as those dealing with cy-près, last week. They were technical clauses that had not caused any witnesses to raise concern, either in written submissions or oral evidence.

To enable members to focus on areas of concern, the Committee could deal with clauses en bloc by asking the departmental officials to explain their overall effect. I will ask members if they have any concerns within any particular group of clauses before proceeding to deal with them en bloc. How do members feel about that approach, as opposed to dealing with each clause individually? If any member is not content to do that, we will proceed on a clause-by-clause basis. If members are content to deal with some clauses en bloc, committee staff will circulate a handling plan for clauses 53 to 129. Members already have a table summarising the consultation responses. If members are happy with that, we can start.

Mr F McCann: The small Churches whose representatives have come here — will what they said be taken on board?

Mr Roy McGivern (Department for Social Development): We will deal with clauses 165 and 166 next Thursday. The evidence sessions today have been extremely helpful in informing our view on how we proceed with those two clauses.

The Acting Chairperson: Are members content to handle clauses en bloc, or do we need to go through them individually?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: Last week, when the Committee was working through the section on cy-près, it was dealing with highly technical clauses. The Department dealt with each clause individually and, by the time members got to the interesting bits, everyone was suffering from a bit of brain fade.

Where it is clear that no issues have been raised on fairly technical clauses, I suggest that you deal with them in blocks of four, five or 10, rather than trawling through every single clause. The Department will explain the overall effect of those clauses, and the Chair will ask members if they have any issues with any individual clause. Sign them off en bloc, rather than dealing with all 186 clauses individually.

Thus, when you reach the interesting bits, such as accounting and accounts procedures, about which you have many concerns, you will be able to focus on those, rather than spending a lot of time on the uninteresting clauses that did not give rise to any issues.

The Acting Chairperson: Are members content to proceed in that way?

Ms Lo: Yes, I am happy to.

The Acting Chairperson: Is there consensus on that?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: If members feel more comfortable going through each clause separately, that is fine. I am just suggesting another way to do things.

Mr McGivern: Some of the clauses have attracted a lot of comments, and we recommend clause-by-clause scrutiny for those, particularly on charity accounts and reporting.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: We know that.

The Acting Chairperson: Members have a table that identifies those clauses.

Miss McIlveen: My only concern is that we could be criticised if we did not do clause-by-clause scrutiny. Other than that, I do not have a problem.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: There will be an explanation of what the overall effect of three, four or five clauses will be. Having had the Bill for a long time, members will have gone through it, so they will be not open to criticism. Grouping clauses for consideration is what is done in the Chamber.

Ms Lo: When similar clauses are grouped, they make more sense.

Mr Kieran Doyle (Department for Social Development): If there is a situation where three or four clauses relate to one area, but are secondary to the provisions of the main clause, we will provide an

overview of the purpose of the cluster of clauses — if the Committee is content with that.

The Acting Chairperson: So we can blame you if someone complains?

Mr Doyle: Yes, you can.

We would also like to address the comments that the Committee has received in its consultation when we give an overview of the groups of clauses. We will address the comments that have been made by various organisations, to assist the Committee.

The Acting Chairperson: Again, are members of the Committee content to do that?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: Members should choose what they are most comfortable with.

Mr F McCann: We will start to lose members soon. Does Michelle have any particular clauses that could be put back to next week?

Ms McIlveen: As long everything is defined and explained, I am happy.

Mr Doyle: If there are three or four clauses that relate to the same category, we intend to explain what the category generally covers. We will also address the comments that have been received on those areas, which may be what the Committee wants.

The Acting Chairperson: Are Members content with that?

Members indicated assent.

Mr McGivern: Clauses 53-57 in Part 6 of the Bill, which deal with the application of property cy-près and assistance and supervision of charities by court and commission, were left over from last week's meeting. In the consultation, no issues were raised on those clauses. Clause 53 relates to the power of the Commission to enter premises, clauses 54-56 deal with legal proceedings, where they are necessary, and clause 57 deals with property held on behalf of English, Welsh and Scottish charities and how it can be transferred in certain circumstances.

The Acting Chairperson: Are members content with clauses 53-57?

Members indicated assent.

Mr McGivern: Clauses 58-60 deal with charity land, restrictions on dispositions of land, and what are termed "charity rentcharges". Clauses 58 and 59 detail the process to be followed when a charity wishes to dispose of land — a function that is currently discharged by the Department. Those clauses simply provide for the transfer of that function from the Department to the proposed new charity commission. The Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association has raised some concerns about clause 58, but the restriction will not apply to the regulation of co-ownership housing

schemes. There is an exemption for such schemes under clause 58(10)(a). I hope that that addresses the point raised by that group.

The Department sees no benefit in enhancing the provisions of article 39 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, as suggested by the Catholic bishops. The issue would apply only in exceptional circumstances, and the purpose could still be served by application of the cy-pres scheme.

Clause 60 relates to a minor exemption for charities concerning "rentcharges" on the sale of property. Those are actually obsolete payments that are tied to land; no charities are creating new "rentcharges" today, but there are still some old arrangements in place. Clause 60 simply provides a way of disposing of those where it is necessary.

The Acting Chairperson: I think that the concern in relation to clause 58 and co-ownership schemes has been sufficiently dealt with. Are members content with clauses 58-60?

Members indicated assent.

Mr McGivern: Clauses 61-63 deal with restrictions on mortgaging. The Department currently receives applications from charities and trustees who want to obtain a mortgage on their property, and again this function will transfer to the new charity commission. The clauses outline circumstances in which trustees may obtain a mortgage on charity land, providing that they obtain proper advice before doing so. The Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association has again raised a concern regarding that matter. However, clause 61(9) states that the provision does not apply to a mortgage for which "general or special authority" is given in accordance with clause 58(10)(a). That excludes mortgages under legally established schemes, such as house sales by way of equity-sharing lease under the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 2003. So, we are able to satisfy the concern of the co-ownership lobby.

The Acting Chairperson: Is there, therefore, no requirement for amendments?

Mr McGivern: Not that we envisage; I think that the point has been addressed.

The Acting Chairperson: Are members content with clauses 61-63?

Members indicated assent.

Mr McGivern: Part 8 deals with charity accounts, reports and returns. It is the Department's view that this is one of the most important parts of the Bill, as it concerns public assurance in charitable giving. The Department has sought to adopt a consistent approach to accounting and reporting requirements, taking into account thresholds across the rest of the UK and in

Ireland. All registered charities will be required to submit annual financial statements and reports to the charity commission, and those will be available for public inspection. An important point to note is that the nature and level of that financial reporting will be proportionate to the income levels of the organisation.

The approach that is being proposed was subject to public consultation by the Department, and, following concerns from the charitable sector, the minimum accounting threshold was increased from £25,000 to £100,000 in the Bill, in line with England, Wales and Scotland. We concede that this is a complex area, and it is recognised that there will be a need for the new charity commission for Northern Ireland to issue detailed advice and guidance on the audit and reporting requirements.

Clause 64 is a general provision requiring charities to observe their duty to keep accounting records. Clause 65 deals with the annual statement of accounts, and empowers the Department to prescribe the form and content of such accounts. Clauses 66 and 67 deal with the annual audit or examination of charity accounts and the supplementary provisions relating to audits. Those clauses specify in detail the audit requirements to be placed on a charity in accordance with its income, which deals with the proportionality issue.

It may be helpful to explain the three distinct bands that will be in operation under the Bill. Where a charity has an income of less than £100,000 a year, the commission will require an annual statement of accounts examined by an independent examiner — that is, any independent person who the trustees believe has the relevant experience and ability to carry out a competent examination of the accounts. That could be a bank manager or a retired accountant, for example.

For charities with an income between £100,000 and £500,000, which is the second band, the commission will require an annual statement of accounts examined by a qualified independent examiner, and that will be a member of a specified professional body. The third band is for charities with an income over £500,000, and that will require a statement of accounts audited by a qualified auditor. That summarises what the three bands will be.

The issue of assets was raised during the consultation. Initially, in the Order that went before Westminster, assets were tied into reporting, as well as income. Indeed, assets of over £2.8 million would have triggered the need for a fully audited account, as in GB, even if the charity's income was below a certain level. There are examples in Northern Ireland of asset-rich but income-poor charities, and some of the Churches especially had an issue with that as a criterion, so we have now separated assets from the

reporting requirements. Charities will still have to report their assets to the commission, but it will not trigger any additional audit requirements, and that is a sensible concession to make.

The issue of charity legacies was also raised during some of the recent evidence sessions, specifically the concern that they might trigger a higher accounting threshold. At this stage, the Department's view is that it would not be appropriate to disregard certain types of income when considering audit thresholds. We do not feel the need to have an amendment to exclude legacies from income calculations.

The Acting Chairperson: Is there any particular reason for that?

Mr McGivern: We believe that there should be a level playing field for all charities. We did not feel that there is a valid need to exclude regular bequests or legacies from a charity's overall income.

Mr F McCann: Using the example of Churches again, because they tend to fall into this category, will charities that get bequests be adversely affected if they declare them?

Mr McGivern: I do not believe that there will be a particularly adverse effect. Certainly, there is a culture in Northern Ireland of giving legacies to individual charities. However, there is also an issue of accountability. The public want assurances that moneys left to charities are being used in a proper manner. We believe that excluding elements of income would not, in some circumstances, give proper public assurance.

Mrs McGill: Will you tell me a bit more about the qualifications required for the different kinds of auditor — for want of a better word — who will examine charities' accounts according to the different bands? Is it the case that the third band requires an auditor with some considerable qualifications?

Mr McGivern: There are three distinct bands. The first band is for charities with an income below £100,000; they will have an independent examiner who does not need to have any professional qualifications, but who should be a competent person whom the trustees regard as such.

Mrs McGill: Can you give me an example of who that might be?

Mr McGivern: It could be a retired bank manager, an accountant — someone the charity is familiar with — perhaps someone who has previously volunteered for them. It will be someone whom the trustees, who know their own business, feel is competent to examine the charity's accounts, but not a professionally qualified person, because that might impose a financial burden. If a charity had to bring in an auditor to do its accounts, there would be a cost attached to that.

The second band requires a qualified independent examiner, and the Bill is quite specific about the qualifications that that person should have. The examiner must be a member of either the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales; the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland; the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Ireland; the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants; the Association of Authorised Public Accountants; the Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators; the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy; or the Association of Charity Independent Examiners. A member of any one of those various professional bodies would be qualified to carry out the examination under the second band.

The third band requires a full independent audit. That requires a qualified auditor, who is eligible for appointment as an auditor, as defined by Part III of the Companies (Northern Ireland) Order 1990, or who:

“is a member of a body for the time being specified in regulations under clause 67, and is ... eligible for appointment as auditor of the charity.”

That is quite specific — it must be a qualified auditor as laid out in the regulations. That is for income over £500,000, which is the top band.

The Acting Chairperson: A number of organisations have asked for the wording of clause 66 to be made clearer. The Department says that this is a complex area, and that it might be difficult to make it any clearer. Has any attempt been made by the Department to make that wording clearer?

Mr Doyle: In that area — as in England, Wales and Scotland — detailed advice and guidance will be provided by the charity commission. The Department for Social Development has drafted a simple table regarding the bands for its own use. Perhaps that type of guidance will be issued by the commission once it is in a position to provide guidance on the auditing, accounting and reporting procedures. I imagine that some simple form of guidance to assist and support charities in meeting their regulatory requirements concerning reporting will be produced.

The Acting Chairperson: I have worked in voluntary organisations for a long time. There are some people who have expertise and would be able to understand the terminology of the Bill reasonably well. However, there are also people on management committees who simply would not have the expertise or knowledge required to interpret that terminology. It would be helpful if the charity commission could provide a guide to clarify the terminology for people who do not have that kind of expertise.

Mr McGivern: That is a valid point. It needs to be made easier to understand. It is very difficult to do that in legislation, as you will appreciate, but we will

ensure that detailed guidance is issued to charitable organisations.

The Acting Chairperson: Many charities use people who give of their time voluntarily. That time could be better spent than in trying to interpret what could be considered to be legalistic jargon.

Mr McGivern: Absolutely.

The Acting Chairperson: There is also a question about charities that are also small companies, and the anomaly between the charity legislation and company law.

Mr McGivern: There have been some issues raised about clause 66(10), in relation to charities that are also companies. Those are not subject to charity legislation; they are regulated by company law. The Companies Act 2006 is being enacted over a period of time, with amendments being made in order to dovetail company and charity legislation in England and Wales.

The Department is monitoring that situation. Clause 181 of this Bill provides a power to make amendments reflecting changes to company law. Any draft Order containing such amendments would be put before the Assembly and this Committee. We appreciate that there will be a need, at some stage, to make those amendments.

Ms Lo: Is the Companies Act 2006 similar to the Charities Bill in its accounting?

Mr Doyle: The 2006 Act covers the whole of the UK. Parts of the Bill amend company law. Although charitable companies are regulated by charity law, there are instances where there is a crossover between company law and charity law — where a company is a charity. Different commencement Orders are being introduced, and as they come into force the Charities Bill will have to be amended to keep charity law in line with company law.

Ms Lo: A lot of voluntary organisations are companies limited by guarantee with charitable status. Obviously, many of them will change to register as charities. Will they still want to remain as a company limited by guarantee? They probably will.

Mr Doyle: If they wish; I will talk about that later as we go through the clauses. A new legal entity will be introduced, to be known as a charitable incorporated organisation. Charities can convert from a charitable company to a charitable incorporated organisation. They will have the same status as a company, but the charity commission will be the lead regulator. That will do away with the dual burden of regulation by Companies Registry and the charity commission.

Mrs McGill: Is the Co-Ownership Housing Association purely a charity?

Mr Doyle: In England and Wales, some housing associations are charities and some are money-making concerns. It would depend on the nature of the co-ownership organisation itself, whether it is a not-for-profit organisation or a for-profit organisation. That would fall under the charity legislation.

Mrs Gill: Is the Co-Ownership Association here a charity?

Ms Lo: I think so.

Mr Doyle: I am not 100% sure. However, if it is not a profit-making organisation or a for-profit organisation, and it has applied to Revenue and Customs for charitable status for tax purposes, then it is, in effect, a charity and comes under charities legislation.

The Acting Chairperson: Are members content with clauses 64-67?

Members indicated assent.

Mr McGivern: Clause 68 reflects the duty of auditors to report matters of material significance to the commission — as one would expect. Clauses 69 and 70 deal with annual reports and their public inspection. Those clauses set out requirements on charities to prepare annual reports and specify the arrangements for public inspection of those reports. That is an important issue in respect of public confidence in charitable activities. Many charities already meet that requirement, particularly those that access statutory funding.

The Acting Chairperson: Are members content with clauses 68-70?

Members indicated assent.

Mr McGivern: Clause 71 deals with annual returns by charities. The charity commission will be expected to issue advice and guidance on the nature and format of those returns. Every effort will be made to ensure that that does not put a further unnecessary burden on charitable organisations. We have had discussions with the UK and Ireland Charity Regulators' Forum to ensure that we have some kind of standard format to collect the information from charities.

The Acting Chairperson: One of the concerns raised is the duplication of regulation. Can you explain that?

Mr Doyle: It is envisaged that the charity commission, once established, will work with other regulators to ensure that there is a minimum of dual regulation for charities to meet their regulatory requirements.

Mrs McGill: In clause 71 it says that charities shall make annual returns:

"containing such information, as may be prescribed by regulations made by the Department."

The regulations are not, therefore, made by the charity commission but by the Department for Social Development?

Mr McGivern: The charity commission will not have the power to make regulations.

Mrs McGill: Therefore, the Department for Social Development will still be the overarching authority — is that the case?

Mr McGivern: The charity commission for Northern Ireland will be a non-departmental public body; it will be the charity authority for Northern Ireland. However, the Department has an oversight and accountability role. If further legislation is required, it will be sponsored by the Department, not the charity commission. The Department would, of course, work closely with the commission to ensure that any such legislation was a requirement for the commission as well as for the Department.

The Acting Chairperson: The Committee would obviously be given the opportunity to scrutinise any legislation.

Mr McGivern: Any legislation sponsored by the Department would go through the same route — through the Committee and through the Assembly.

The Acting Chairperson: The Committee would, therefore, have an input.

Mr McGivern: Yes.

Mr Doyle: There is a similar situation in England and Wales with the Charity Commission there. However, the Office of the Third Sector drafts its regulations and Orders. In Scotland, the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator cannot make legislation. That is done for it by the Scottish Assembly.

Mrs McGill: You mentioned the charity commission and the charity authority.

Mr McGivern: The charity commission will be the charity authority.

Mrs McGill: Regarding financial requirements, however, it will still be the Department that sets down those regulations?

Mr McGivern: We have to make the regulations, lay the regulations, and draft the legislation. Clearly, we will have to consult closely with the charity commission about the contents of that legislation, but the charity commission in itself will not be able to draft legislation.

Mrs McGill: And will that require legislation? It says:

"as may be prescribed by regulations made by the Department"

Is that legislation?

Mr McGivern: That is the intention at this stage. Once the commission is established, it may require legislation to prescribe the nature of returns by charities. That is the position in the rest of the UK.

The Acting Chairperson: The Committee is about to lose its quorum. If Members are agreed, the Committee will adjourn until next week and continue where we have left off. Some people are leaving. I hope that it is nothing to do with my being in the Chair and not a personal reflection on my ability.

Mr McGivern: Just one point: we can work with the Committee Clerk to look at the schedule of clauses for next week. Clauses 165 and 166 were to be included. Perhaps that can be discussed during the course of the next week.

The Acting Chairperson: Thank you.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

12 March 2008

BUILDING REGULATIONS (AMENDMENT) BILL (NIA 11/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Simon Hamilton
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Jennifer McCann
Mr Adrian McQuillan
Mr Declan O'Loan
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Mrs Hilda Hagan	}	Department of Finance and Personnel
Mr Seamus McCrystal		
Mr Gerry McKibbin		

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Storey): I welcome Seamus McCrystal, head of building standards branch, Hilda Hagan of properties division, and Gerry McKibbin of building regulations branch to the Committee.

Mr Seamus McCrystal (Department of Finance and Personnel): I will keep the presentation brief because the purpose of the session is for members to ask us questions and clarify matters. The Bill proposes amendments to the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 1979, which has been amended once, in 1991. The 1979 Order is the primary legislation relating to building regulations in Northern Ireland, and the Bill aims to update the Order to take account of changes to industry practice and changes to the legislation in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland.

The purpose of the Bill is to build on the existing legislative framework by refining the powers, duties and rights of the Department, the district councils that enforce the regulations, and applicants. The existing general principles of the Order are to secure the health, safety, welfare and convenience of persons in and

around buildings and to further the conservation of fuel and power.

The Department has proposed several amendments to the Bill, the two most significant of which aim to extend those general principles to include the protection and enhancement of the environment and the promotion of sustainable development, matching similar amendments to building regulations in England, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, and to facilitate a move from a deemed-to-satisfy-based system to a guidance-based system.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you, Seamus. What targets and timetables are there, including those on an EU level, to reduce carbon emissions and increase the use of renewable energy sources? How will the building regulations contribute to meeting those targets?

Mr McCrystal: At the moment, building regulations make a significant contribution, but they apply mainly to new buildings only or to buildings that are being substantially refurbished. The Department made an amendment in August 2006 — which came into effect in November 2006 — to that part of the building regulations relating to the conservation of fuel and power. The amendment aims to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from buildings by up to 40% compared with previous levels.

The Minister has asked building standards branch to make a further amendment to the building regulations to produce another 25% reduction in emissions by 2010, and a subsequent reduction in 2013, in order to achieve an overall reduction in carbon dioxide emissions of 44%.

The last amendment to the building regulations took into consideration a number of the requirements of the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive, which required the use of national calculation methodologies. Previously, compliance with building regulations relating to conservation of fuel and power involved assessing each element on its own thermal value. However, the methodologies combined those elements using nationally available software packages to produce a target emissions rate per building. An applicant must then demonstrate to building control that the actual building design either meets, or betters, those target emissions.

Mr Hamilton: When the concept of type approval first arose in briefings, it seemed like a good idea that should have been operating a long time ago. The Department's paper indicates that the principal Order allowed for type approval some time ago but that it was never commenced. Will you clarify for my benefit and the benefit of the Committee the range of properties you envisage will be covered by type approval? At the higher end of the scale, what types

and scales of buildings will be allowed? Why was that part of the Order never commenced?

Do you envisage all type-approval decisions becoming the responsibility of district councils, or will any element be retained by the Department?

Mrs Hilda Hagan (Department of Finance and Personnel): We expect type-approval decisions to be confined largely to buildings in the private-dwelling sector, although, if, for example, someone wanted to build a particular design of storage warehouses in Belfast and Coleraine, type approval could extend to such industrial buildings. It could even apply to companies such as McDonalds.

Mr Hamilton: Could it apply to fast-food restaurants?

Mrs Hagan: Yes; type approval will facilitate a broad range of building types.

I do not know why that element of the Order was not commenced, except to say that no one approached, or lobbied, the Department in an effort to commence it until 2004-05, when the scope of the primary legislation was being considered and we decided to review the 1979 Order as amended. Having said that, although type approval has, to some extent, been operating informally, the matter has never been formally raised. However, the fact that the same types of social housing have been built in different district council areas is evidence that building control and the Department for Social Development have informally been type-approving. Therefore, although the commencement of type approval has not been formally requested, or used, it has been operating informally to some extent. I do not remember your third question.

Mr Hamilton: Will any type-approval powers be retained by the Department, or will such decisions lie totally with district councils?

Mrs Hagan: Type-approval powers relate only to non-site-specific matters. For example, if someone wishes to build a particular type of dwelling in three district council areas, the primary legislation requires the district council that receives the application to consult with the other two councils. Councils will set up administrative mechanisms to allow other councils to have a say in specific type-approval decisions. However, they will only be able to deal with non-site-specific matters; for example, overall type approval.

When it comes to building a house in one of the approved district-council areas, site-specific matters — such as ground conditions, drainage, soil, or the proximity of a building to other structures that might constitute a fire hazard — will be the responsibility of the local district council. Superstructure elements — the above-ground bits — and the house's design are

non-site-specific elements that can be type approved by any district council.

Mr Hamilton: In practice, what financial impact will the Bill have on district councils? Type approval and other elements of the Bill have the potential to cause additional work for district councils. Will resources follow that work? Building control can be quite — for the want of a better word — profitable, and although district councils are not in the business of making profits, they can cover costs incurred. Therefore, in order to maintain the situation, are there any assurances that district councils will not be unduly burdened and that central-Government resources will follow the work.

Mr McCrystal: The Building (Prescribed Fees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997 are due to be amended, and we have discussed the matter with building control. If type approval were to be introduced as a result of this Bill, it would be part of the overall fees regulations review, which would ensure that building control would be funded to carry out its work.

Mr Hamilton: That is good.

Mr McCrystal: Mrs Hagan said that, in the past, type approvals have been used successfully in social housing. The best example of that was the Housing Executive's remit to build general family housing. It had a range of standard house types that were approved and accepted by building control throughout Northern Ireland.

The Deputy Chairperson: If type-approval powers were to be given to each council, would there be a danger of different approaches being taken?

Mr McCrystal: That is a concern associated with function-based regulations, which require reasonable measures to be taken. District councils might interpret regulations differently.

The converse of that would be true in this case. If a type-approval system were introduced, and if building control had an administrative mechanism in place to deal with it, the approach would be more uniform and consistent, which would not just affect type approvals; it would have a knock-on effect for one-off applications. We discussed the matter with building control, which will consider the administrative provisions to be put in place.

Mr Weir: Mr Hamilton covered some of the ground that I intended to cover. Financial implications for councils was mentioned. Leaving that aside for the moment; as the detailed work will be carried out by building regulation officers at district-council level, what other implications would district councils face?

Mrs Hagan: Basically, a type-approval system would streamline the approach taken to approvals

because councils could organise themselves to approve an application that falls across several council borders. It will bring consistency and uniformity to councils' approach.

The cost would have to be worked out through the fees regulations, and a balance will have to be struck between how the councils charge under the new system and the impact on the applicant or applicants. Details of that division will have to be worked out through the review of the fees regulations. The key positive impact will be the streamlining of the application process so that an individual applicant will not have to apply separately to three different district councils and pay three separate fees for building exactly the same type of house in three district council boundaries.

Mr Weir: Clause 3 deals with the building regulations advisory committee. Has any consideration been given to how its members will be appointed? Will the Minister make nominations? Will there be open competition, or will bodies be asked to make nominations? What is the thinking on that issue?

Mr Gerry McKibbin (Department of Finance and Personnel): The existing committee was set up in accordance with the Nolan principles. We approached the professional organisations and asked them to inform their members that self-nominations to the committee were being sought. The idea behind the committee is to ensure that there is representation from a good cross-section of the industry and that there is expertise from, and knowledge of, particular parts of that industry, rather than representation from a particular body.

There have been moves in one of the other Departments to introduce statutory requirements as regards the Nolan principles, so we have pre-empted that to some extent. We do not envisage the need for appointments by Ministers. Given that the Nolan principles allow for self-nomination, we believe that that is the best way forward, whether it involves approaching professional bodies or placing a public notice in the paper or whatever.

Mr Weir: That is a reasonable position. However, would you expect — or allow for — one or two nominations for places on the advisory committee to come from building control officers?

Mr McKibbin: Four building control officers sit on the committee at present. Two elected council representatives served on the previous committee, and a good cross-section of council opinion is represented on the Committee.

Mr Weir: I appreciate the remarks about the Nolan principles, but would there be merit in securing those places? I presume that thoughts are not finalised on the composition of the new advisory committee; so, would

it make sense to ring-fence those places to at least ensure such representation continues? From the technical perspective, if the work is to be carried out at council level, it is vital to have council representation at both officer and elected member level on the committee. I appreciate that there is such representation at present, but it is not guaranteed. The committee would be in a position to say that although some proposals may be great from the professional perspective, they would not work at the practical, council level. That aspect needs to be considered.

Mr McKibbin: We have always had district council representation on the Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Council (NIBRAC), whether at elected representative level or building control level.

We normally look at NIBRAC's planned work programme for a three-year period, or the subsequent three-year period, and consider what appropriate experience and expertise we need to bring to the committee to cover that work. It is inevitable that building control will always be represented because district council's voice is vital to formulation of the policy on building regulations.

Mr McCrystal: Much of the work in developing proposals for the regulations is carried out at subcommittee level. When we feel that there is a need for additional expertise at that level, we co-opt members. We have co-opted a couple of individuals, including building control officers, and we have found their contribution to be invaluable to our discussions.

Mr Weir: The same applies to those who are involved directly in the profession. It is vital that an advisory committee covers all the angles. There is no point in having something that will work out brilliantly at district council level, if it does not meet professional standards.

Mr McCrystal: In addition to that committee, we meet on a quarterly basis with a representative body from building control and discuss the issues that it is experiencing at ground level. Some of the issues that have been included in the Bill have come out of those meetings. We find the feedback from district councils invaluable.

The Deputy Chairperson: How are people appointed to the committee?

Mr McCrystal: We propose to catch up on what we did last time around, when there were vacancies on the committee. A number of years ago, we would have asked representative bodies, such as the professions and the district councils, to nominate individuals to sit on the committee. However, in order to follow the Commissioner for Public Appointments code of practice, we have asked those bodies to advise their members that we were seeking nominations from individuals. They encouraged individuals to apply, and

they did apply. An appointments process was drawn up, overseen by an independent observer appointed by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. He scrutinised every stage, sat in on the interviews, and reported to the Commissioner afterwards.

Mr McQuillan: If the Committee is content to move on, may I ask about clause 4 of the Bill?

The Deputy Chairperson: That is OK. If members want to ask questions about individual clauses, we can return later to those that have not yet been mentioned.

Mr McQuillan: I want to know the difference between the terms “deemed-to-satisfy” and “guidance-based”. What benefits will flow from the change from one to the other?

Mr McCrystal: Technically, there is no difference between the provisions. The deemed-to-satisfy provisions provide a benchmark which, if followed, will satisfy the requirements of a regulation, through the adoption of the solution that is in the technical booklet.

With functional-based regulations and solutions; when the regulations ask for reasonable provision to be made, and a solution is provided, and if an applicant then decides that they do not want to follow that solution, or cannot, because of individual circumstances, a gap arises in understanding the background to the regulation.

With a guidance-based system, we will be able to set out the objectives and design considerations of the requirement and provide a solution. It will be a more holistic approach. It is not as though, by moving from one system to the other, we will not be providing adequate solutions. The deemed-to-satisfy measures state that the solution “will meet the requirements” whereas the guidance measures will state that the solution “should meet the requirements”. It will be for the building control officer to determine, in particular circumstances, whether something additional is required.

Mr McQuillan: Is there not a risk that the change will lead to greater disparities in the system?

Mr McCrystal: I do not think so: the regulations and the solutions will still exist. We will be providing the design considerations. It is really meant for the situation in which someone does not want to follow the “prescriptive” solution, and I hesitate to use that word because one does not have to follow any of the solutions.

If people decide not to follow the given solution, they must demonstrate to a building control officer how they will meet the requirements. If they can demonstrate that they followed the objectives of the requirement and took on board the design considerations, an alternative approach will be considered.

Mr McQuillan: It seems to be going in the same direction as the Planning Service, in that individual officers are going to be left to make up their own minds. It will be unregulated, and it will mean different things to different people.

Mr McCrystal: I do not think that that will be the case. However, the Committee will be taking evidence on that point. Building control officers, by and large, support the changes in the legislation. The deemed-to-satisfy provision is potentially restrictive in the modern-day construction industry, and in some instances makes it difficult for us to provide a solution in every circumstance — we simply cannot do that. In such situations, if we can supply the design considerations, the designer will know what direction to follow in order to meet the requirement.

The Deputy Chairperson: Given that other jurisdictions have gone through the process and will have made the changes, has there been any information from them, or has the Department consulted them, on that? There is a concern that individual officers might interpret the regulations differently under the new system.

Mr McCrystal: With a functional-based requirement, there will always be room for interpretation regardless of whether we provide guidance-based or deemed-to-satisfy solutions.

With regard to other jurisdictions, the system has been in place in England and Wales since the mid-1980s. It was introduced in Scotland last year, and it has existed in the Republic of Ireland for several years. In a sense, we are playing catch-up.

In England and Wales, there is a review of building regulations, which was brought about as a result of criticism of an amendment that was made several years ago. It was decided to ask stakeholders for their views on the guidance. Some respondents stated that the guidance had become overly complicated. The Royal Institute of British Architects made the point that it welcomed the guidance when it was first introduced, and that although it still sees benefit in the guidance-based system, successive amendments to the documents have made it somewhat complex. The review is trying to stop the drift and return the guidance to what the designers and building control require it to be.

The Deputy Chairperson: Mr Beggs; is your question about this clause?

Mr Beggs: No.

The Deputy Chairperson: Before we move away from clause 4, there is the use of the term “promote sustainable development”. Is “sustainable development” defined in the legislation? Is it concerned with environmental, financial or economic sustainability? What is the definition of that phrase?

Mrs Hagan: Sustainable development is not defined in the Bill. In general, we refer to the definition of sustainable development that is included in the sustainable development strategy. Many minds have tried to define sustainable development, and one of many definitions could be inserted. One of the difficulties in drafting primary legislation is that one must be careful not to over-define certain terms, because that can restrict what one can do.

The types of things that we are thinking about are listed in the amendments to the schedule, and cover issues such as the sustainable use of water, limiting pollution and so on. I cannot remember everything that is listed in the Order.

Mr McCrystal: Clause 1 of the Bill deals with article 2 of the principal Order. Article 2 defines several terms and we propose to include definitions for low- or zero-carbon systems. Clause 1(2) of the Bill refers to schedule 1 of the Order, which lists the matters for which building regulations may be made. We have listed a number of proposed amendments to be included in the schedule, basically to widen the scope of building regulations to take into consideration, as Mrs Hagan said, aspects such as pollution, nuisance, matters affecting conservation of fuel and power, sustainable use of water and so on.

Mr Beggs: My understanding of clause 1 and the amendment to schedule 1 of the 1979 Order is that they will enable the introduction of subsequent regulations without going through the tortuous consultation process that has taken place to date. Will you confirm that clause 1 will mean the facilitation of mandatory microgeneration at some point without the requirement for significant new legislation, and that only the regulations would change?

Mr McCrystal: That would not require an amendment to the primary legislation but would require an amendment to building regulations. When amendments to building regulations are made, consultation always takes place. We would not simply make regulations and enforce them; they would be brought to the Committee, be issued for public consultation, and the responses would be brought back to the Committee.

We recognise that although microgeneration is not cost-effective at the moment, there could be a time when it will become so — when the systems are more reliable and more readily available than they are now. To use a crude analogy, microgeneration could be considered in the same way that computers were thought of in the 1980s — they were very expensive and had little capacity or power. In the past 20 years, many people have got computers that are much more cost-effective than they were. If microgeneration were to get to that point, and a regulatory impact assessment

showed that there would be a decent payback, we would go that way. At the moment, we intend to concentrate on improving the thermal efficiency of buildings, because that is currently a much more cost-effective way of conserving power.

Mr Beggs: I appreciate that, but, in deciding not to take the route of mandatory microgeneration, did you consult other Departments? It is unfortunate that the Reconnect programme is ending at the same time as this promised programme, not now being considered, was to be introduced — it means that the sector faces a double whammy.

Mr McCrystal: No, we did not consult other Departments on that matter.

Mr Beggs: Clause 2 is entitled “Protected buildings”, and uses the phrase “have regard to” with respect to the protection of historic buildings. The character of historic buildings such as Carrickfergus Castle and some historic town halls would be altered if the regulations did not give them some protection. Are you satisfied that that wording will provide sufficient protection? What degree of flexibility will the wording, “have regard to”, provide to building control officers when making their assessments?

Mrs Hagan: Informally, building control already has regard to the character of protected buildings. It has been doing that for some time. The legislation will formalise what building control has already been doing. The term “have regard to” has been included by the Office of the Legislative Counsel as a fairly standard way of drafting a provision such as this one, but it nevertheless has a legal standing and it will place a legal requirement on district councils to bear that in mind. I imagine that they will continue to do that, as they have done informally for the past few years. That will not make any difference to how building control considers applications that impact on protected buildings.

Mr Beggs: I am trying to get a better understanding of clause 10, which is entitled “Civil liability”. The wording used in the briefing is that the Minister has announced that he will remove the proposed repeal of article 20. That means that it will stay in. Why was a proposal made to take it out and another made to keep it in? The briefing says that OFMDFM considered that its retention may encourage compliance with the regulations. In the light of that, why has it not been introduced before now and put to use?

Mr McKibbin: Article 20, as it stands, and if it were to be commenced, would allow someone who is taking action for personal injury or property damage to use non-compliance with building regulations in support of their case. Defendants could use also non-compliance to support their case. When the article was written and introduced into the 1979 Order,

building regulations were largely prescriptive; they set out the exact requirements to be met.

The regulations subsequently became more functional, whereby one could show that one had made reasonable provision to satisfy certain parts of the requirements. We proposed to revoke the article because we never had a request to commence it, nor was it felt that there was a need to commence it at the time. However, when the Bill was passing through the Executive in November, OFMDFM asked whether commencing the article would not be a way of further encouraging compliance — by having a legal stick, so to speak. In other words, it could be used in all claims involving non-compliance. Although that would still be the case, the way the article is currently written would no longer be appropriate because of the move to functional regulations.

Building control might find itself joined in many cases in which it has to show that the regulations were reasonable or considered to be reasonable. We have agreed with the Minister — and the Minister said in the debate last week — that we will see whether there is any way of amending the article to make it more appropriate for existing regulations. We will do that and, if necessary, bring a further amendment to replace article 20. The decision to remove the revocation was to allow the Bill to stand, so it would be amending rather than inserting a new piece of legislation.

Mr Beggs: When do you hope to have that amendment? Obviously, the sooner it is brought forward the better, so that it can tie in to the rest of the process that the Committee is dealing with.

Mr McKibbin: It is not likely to be during the lifespan of this Bill passing through the Assembly. I believe that it will come after that. There is considerable work involved with this and with other matters and we do not have the resources to take those forward at the moment. However, it is a matter to which we shall be returning.

Mr O’Loan: As regards clause 4, and the shift from the deemed-to-satisfy system to the guidance-based system, you said that “deemed-to-satisfy” is felt to be too restrictive and that people can get into jams in which everyone wants to move along but cannot do so because of the existing regulations. You indicated that building control officers would be happier moving to a guidance-based system, which would give them more discretion. Are developers in favour of that change?

Mr McCrystal: Developers are represented on NIBRAC. We have also met with builders and developers as part of stakeholder consultations. They welcome the change because it is more in line with regulatory procedures in the rest of the British Isles. Rather than having to take guidance documents from elsewhere and translate them into deemed-to-satisfy

provisions, we could be more responsive to changes elsewhere and write guidance more quickly so that there would be a more unified standard in building regulations throughout the country. Builders are now much more mobile, so developers from here can be found working in Scotland or England. It becomes onerous for them if they find that they have three different standards to meet. On that basis, they welcome the change.

Mr O’Loan: Turning to clause 1 and energy performance: the thrust of the clause is to enable the Department to make regulations regarding the energy performance of buildings. The Department and the Minister have indicated that that should include energy emissions, focusing on insulation standards and the efficiency of heating systems.

Mr McCrystal: Absolutely.

Mr O’Loan: You said that microgeneration is not cost-effective, by which, I presume, you mean that payback times are lengthy given the technology available at the moment.

Will EU targets on energy emissions from buildings be achieved without some level of mandatory microgeneration for domestic buildings? Is there not an argument that technological improvements will be enhanced and accelerated by introducing a mandatory element?

Mr McCrystal: The difficulty with building regulations is that they are the minimum legal requirement — they were never best practice, but a mop-up procedure. However, the standards in building regulations are by no means low.

The last amendment made to building regulations was on the conservation of fuel and power. Mr O’Loan mentioned efficiency of heating systems — we require boilers to be 86% efficient and good heating control systems. We also facilitate developers who want to use microgeneration systems rather than preventing those who want to. However, we do say that there is a carbon-dioxide emissions level that people must not go above, which is a high target to meet. Wood-pellet boilers are regarded as the most cost-effective microgeneration system, but they are not appropriate in every circumstance. If they work, that is grand.

Mrs Hagan: With respect to meeting EU emissions targets, it is worth bearing in mind that building regulations only apply, as Mr McCrystal mentioned, to new buildings, or to those buildings that are undergoing major refurbishment — less than 2% of the building stock in Northern Ireland. Building regulations cannot be applied retrospectively because of cost implications. Therefore, the opportunity for building regulations to reduce carbon emissions is quite limited because they only apply to 2% of the building stock.

Mr O'Loan: Do building regulations apply when there are refurbishments, extensions and other similar works to buildings?

Mrs Hagan: Yes.

Mr O'Loan: That would increase the percentage of the stock to which the building regulations would apply; would it not? I have heard high figures quoted from building control in my district council on the changeover in houses. In other words; that such activities could have a significant impact on the percentage of buildings that the building regulations apply to over a short period of time. Therefore, what you are saying is surprising. You are making a contrary argument.

Mr McCrystal: To expand the discussion away from the Bill, energy-performance certificates will have a significant effect and will bring house efficiency to the attention of householders. Not long ago, we brought an SL1 to the Committee, and we hope to be making regulations relatively soon. Each certificate will give a band rating for properties when they are constructed, sold or rented, which must be given to the purchaser or the tenant and will be similar to the markings on a fridge, or other white goods, in a shop.

There will be a list of cost-effective recommendations with the certificate. For example, if every bulb in a household is replaced with a low-energy light bulb, each would cost £3. However, the householder will save £7 a year per bulb and £60 over the lifetime of the bulb. If that saving were multiplied, the cost of the certificate will be recouped in about two years. Those fundamental recommendations will be given to the householder. Other examples include the benefits of upgrading the insulation in the roof space of a building or putting a lagging jacket on the hot-water storage tank. That is how the Department can affect those houses where structural alterations are not caught by building regulations — through another set of regulations.

Mr O'Loan: I am interested in the comment that building regulations are not thought of as the best practice, because I thought that they were. By some international standards, the insulation and energy-efficiency standards in our buildings are awful; I have been to Canada where, years ago, people would have had very high standards of insulation.

I certainly take the point that cost effectiveness must be a factor. However, I would have thought that the Assembly should be leaning heavily towards the best-practice argument as being the test for regulations.

The Deputy Chairperson: Will certificates apply only to new and refurbished properties, or will they apply to every property?

Mr McCrystal: They will not apply to every property: they will apply to buildings upon

construction and to those that are sold or rented. Therefore, if you intend to stay in your house, you will not need a certificate. However, if you intend to sell your house, one of the first things that the estate agent will ask you is whether you have an energy performance certificate. If you do not, you must acquire one because it has to be made available to the potential purchaser and be given to him or her on completion of the sale.

The Deputy Chairperson: Will that be carried out by the local council?

Mr McCrystal: Production of certificates is carried out by accredited energy assessors. That is a requirement of the EU Energy Performance of Buildings Directive.

The Deputy Chairperson: I want to return to clause 2 and the preservation of the character of protected buildings. There is currently a listing and grading of buildings. At what point in the spectrum are we operating? With respect to clause 2, what will initiate and define what is to be construed as a protected building? A range of buildings has been specified in the clause. Will it cover all of them?

Mrs Hagan: The Department has drawn on the specification that the Department of the Environment uses to define a protected building. The range of buildings included on the list of protected buildings is exactly the same as that to which building regulations will apply, and as the list is amended, so building regulations will extend — or contract — if certain buildings are added to or taken off the list. The Department of Finance and Personnel will stick closely with the Department of the Environment's definition in the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991.

Mr McKibbin: There is nothing to prevent building control from considering buildings outside that definition, such as those that are examples of local vernacular architecture or are in an area of townscape character not caught by the Department of the Environment's definition. Building control might still consider those characteristics when it applies the regulations. However, it will be required under legislation only to apply the regulations to protected buildings.

The Deputy Chairperson: Is that the definition or mechanism to which the terms used will have regard? Are there other factors that would be taken into consideration?

Mr McKibbin: There could be other factors. Indeed, with regard to the earlier discussion on guidance, the Department could, for example, produce guidance for district councils to use when they are having regard to such buildings. National Heritage has produced guidance in England and Wales, and the Environment and Heritage Service has produced a document that could be used, effectively, as a guidance

document, and which would give district councils a line to follow.

Mr F McCann: In the past, buildings that have been listed have been bought, and builders have demolished them and said that they did not realise that the building was listed. Who has the power to deal with those people when that happens?

Mr McKibbin: Demolition of listed buildings is covered by planning legislation, not by building control. It is up to Planning Service to deal with that situation.

The Deputy Chairperson: If I have followed the course of events today, we have considered clauses 1, 2, 3 and 4. Clause 5 deals with guidance documents. How will the new guidance differ from existing technical documents? Will it be more accessible and easier to understand?

Mr McCrystal: Because they are technical documents, they are meant to be read by a technical audience. However, as I said earlier, the Department will provide guidance on the thought process, design considerations and suchlike. It is hoped that when a designer works his or her way through the guidance and gets to a solution, he or she will understand how we have moved away from the functional requirement to reasonable provision. When he or she is considering an aspect of their building — whether it be access, conservation of fuel and power, or whatever — they will understand the objectives of the requirement for design considerations and follow it through to the solution. In fact, with a guidance-based system, the Department may provide more than one solution.

We may offer a solution ourselves, or we might refer to British standard, or other recognised technical documents.

The Deputy Chairperson: Will there be a legal basis for any of that?

Mr McCrystal: No. The current legal basis, “deemed to satisfy”, is written into the regulations. However, it would be a foolish designer who would ignore the guidance. Clause 5(1) of the Bill provides for the introduction of article 5A(7), which will state that:

“A failure on the part of a person to comply with guidance published under this Article does not of itself render that person liable to any civil or criminal proceedings; but the guidance is admissible in evidence”.

If building control has to take legal action against someone, the guidance could be used in evidence to establish whether the designer had followed the correct route or ignored it completely.

The Deputy Chairperson: Is there a risk involved? I hope that I am interpreting it correctly. As that requirement is not based in a legal context, as the

current structures are, could it be used as an opt-out if a matter were to go to court?

Mr McCrystal: I do not think that that would be the case. The designer may opt for a different solution to the one in the guidance document. Building control will assess that, and if it is decided that the solution offered does not satisfy its requirement for reasonable provision, the discussion between the two parties will follow the design considerations to see whether or not the designer has followed the guidance, and it will go through the objectives of the requirement and the design considerations. The onus is always on the applicant to demonstrate to building control that he or she has satisfied the requirement.

The Deputy Chairperson: Clause 7 of the Bill mentions article 12 of the principal Order, which covers the existing provision for tests. Has that been commenced?

Mr McKibbin: No. The change in clause 7 is quite a small one. As article 12 of the 1979 Order stands, it lists a number of tests that can be applied. We are changing that to allow us to provide in the regulations for those tests. It will allow us, to some extent, to control the number of tests that can be requested, rather than just give people carte blanche to ask for anything and save them from satisfying the requirements of the regulations.

For example, the amendment to technical booklet F that came about in 2006 could require an airtightness test to satisfy ventilation requirements regulations, which could be one of the tests that we could provide for in these regulations.

Article 12 was never commenced. We never had any call to commence it. However, bearing in mind that we are now moving towards prescribing tests in building regulations, we feel that the article is now applicable and we will be starting the process to commence it when this Bill completes its legislative stages.

The Deputy Chairperson: If the Committee has other questions in relation to the other clauses, would you be happy if we forward them to you for reply?

Mr McCrystal: Yes.

The Deputy Chairperson: In conclusion, the consultation that was carried out raised issues to which no resolution was found. In addition to building control practitioners and the professional bodies, was there any feedback from the general public, or bodies representative of house buyers or self-build organisations?

Mr McKibbin: Most of the consultee responses that we received came from district councils or professional bodies. As the Minister said in the debate last week, it is quite a dry subject for the man in the street. Historically, we tend to get responses from the designers who are

involved in building regulations on a daily basis, rather than interested members of the public.

The Deputy Chairperson: So, nothing was raised during the consultation that has not been resolved?

Mr McKibbin: Several issues were raised either about the proposals that we put out for consultation initially or about those that arose from the consultation and that were not, for various reasons, taken forward in the Bill. Often, that was because consultees were considering matters that were better addressed by subordinate legislation — the building regulations — than primary legislation.

Until a fairly late stage, we were proposing to insert clauses on the control of dangerous buildings. Building control approached the Department with that requirement. Building control currently uses extremely old pieces of legislation, some going back as far as 1854, to control dangerous buildings. They had asked whether we could consolidate those pieces of legislation into one, to which we agreed.

However, during subsequent consultations at a building control workshop, it became a question of “be careful what you wish for” and further discussions were requested. Therefore, we agreed to remove the clause from the Bill and to discuss with building control, and any other parties, the inclusion of clauses that would be more appropriate to their requirements.

Mr McCrystal: We had a meeting with building control on Friday at which we suggested that, because it operates at ground level and applies the current legislation, it should put together a working party to examine the matter in more detail and come back to us, at which point we will give the matter further consideration.

The Deputy Chairperson: As members have no further questions, I thank Seamus, Gerry and Hilda for coming today. It has been a useful and informative meeting. No doubt, we will see you again.

Do Members agree to forward any outstanding issues from the Committee paper to the Department and request a written response?

Members indicated assent.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

13 March 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 Jonathan Craig
Ms Anna Lo
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Alban Maginness

Witnesses:

Mr Kieran Doyle	}	Department for Social Development
Mr Roy McGivern		

The Chairperson (Mr Campbell): I welcome Mr Kieran Doyle and Mr Roy McGivern, who will guide us through the clauses of the Charities Bill. Gentlemen, I am pleased to see you, although I might not be saying that at the end of the meeting.

Last week, the Committee had been briefed as far as clause 71, so perhaps you would begin with clause 72.

Mr Roy McGivern (Department for Social Development): Clause 72 comes under part 8 “Charity accounts, Reports and Returns”, and it gives the commission the power to impose financial penalties for non-compliance. The clause is based on standard sections in the charities legislation in England and Wales and in Scotland.

The Chairperson: There seems to be an issue about the duplication of regulations. How has that been addressed?

Mr Kieran Doyle (Department for Social Development): Once established, the charity commission will work with other regulators to ensure that there is no duplication and to ensure that charities meet the regulatory requirements.

The Chairperson: Will the commission be robust in doing that?

Mr Doyle: Yes.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 72?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 73.

Mr McGivern: Clause 73 deals with group accounts. It makes provision for charities with a parent body to submit a group account rather than individual statements from each charity. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland raised some issues about that provision. However, it will be for the charity, rather than the charity commission, to decide whether to submit such accounts. In fact, experience in England and Wales leads us to believe that most large Churches will submit a group account rather than ask individual congregations to submit separate accounts.

The Chairperson: What is the issue with single registrations?

Mr McGivern: Registration is slightly different. It is open to any organisation to register as a charity if it meets the necessary conditions and can demonstrate that it has a charitable purpose. Large denominations can choose to submit a group account to cover several registrations from individual congregations and from the larger parent body. In many cases, it would make sense to submit a group account.

The Chairperson: I imagine that that would make sense for a larger denomination.

Are members content with clause 73?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 74.

Mr McGivern: Clause 74 is one of several clauses that come under the general heading of “Incorporation of Charity Trustees”. I will hand over to Mr Doyle to expand on that.

Mr Doyle: As we deal with this set of clauses, we will discuss the legal aspects of setting up charities and trustees’ responsibilities.

There are three ways of setting up a charity in Northern Ireland: as a charitable trust; as an unincorporated charity; or as a charitable company. Clause 74 deals with the incorporation of the trustees of a charity; it provides for the trustees of a charity, rather than the whole charity, to become a body corporate. The advantage of the trustees becoming a body corporate is that the property of the charity would be vested in the name of the incorporated body. That avoids the need for execution of deeds, the transfer of land or investments to new names or the appointment of new holding trustees. The trustees enter into contracts and can sue and be sued in the name of the

incorporated body. Thus this clause provides for a form of incorporation for trustees if the charity is not a corporate body.

During the public consultation, the Presbyterian Church asked for clarification on the status of its trustees. The Church said that its trustees are a corporate body; in that case, the trustees will benefit from all the advantages of incorporation.

The Chairperson: What about voluntary committee member participation? I think that it was a representative from a group that worked in supporting communities who said that the Bill could deter some people from becoming trustees.

Mr Doyle: Perhaps some people fear that the legislation will put people off wanting to be trustees. From the point of view of the proposed charity commission, there has to be a legal framework to ensure that charities are well managed, well governed and well run. The Charities Bill provides an opportunity to introduce such a legal framework. Many of the provisions of the Bill have been welcomed, and it is good that a formal structure will be put in place for charities.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 74?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clauses 75 to 86, about which the Committee has received no communication. Mr Doyle, would you like to deal with those as a block?

Mr Doyle: Clauses 75 to 86 provide further details about the application process for incorporation and how a person, charity or organisation applies for it.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clauses 75 to 86?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 87.

Mr Doyle: Clause 87 provides details of the persons who would be disqualified from being a charity trustee: those convicted of an offence involving dishonesty, deception or bankruptcy; and those who have been disqualified from being a trustee in England and Wales. The Committee heard comments on clause 87 during its evidence sessions. One was received from the Chief Officers 3rd Sector (CO3) regarding ex-prisoners who may be involved in a prisoner welfare group, for instance. It was queried whether they would be disqualified because they had been convicted of a criminal offence. Clause 87(4) permits the charity commission for Northern Ireland to use its discretion to waive a disqualification, and I imagine that it will consider each case individually.

The Chairperson: One would imagine that it would be only in the most exceptional circumstances that the charity commission would waive a disqualification.

Mr Doyle: Yes, but we foresee a situation arising in Northern Ireland where an ex-prisoner may wish to become a trustee of a charity. The facility will exist for the ex-prisoner's disqualification to be waived.

Clause 87 provides that those who have been disqualified by the Charity Commission for England and Wales or by the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator will be disqualified from being trustees here. The Volunteer Development Agency asked why that did not extend to people who had been disqualified in the Irish Republic. There are several reasons for that, including the fact that the Southern charities legislation has not yet been enacted. That point is worth exploring, but we cannot do so until the Southern legislation has been enacted. The two Governments would have to enter into an agreement to allow that to happen, and there may also be issues of European legislation.

The Chairperson: When is the Southern legislation likely to be enacted?

Mr Doyle: The Irish charities legislation is going through Parliament, so it should be enacted about the same time as our Charities Bill; there might be only a difference of months.

The Chairperson: Will the Southern legislation cover people who have been disqualified from being trustees in Poland or Lithuania, given the number of migrant workers coming from those countries?

Mr Doyle: I would need to check.

Mr McGivern: It would depend on whether there were charity regulations in the jurisdictions from which they come. In many European countries, I suspect that such regulations are not in place. However, we would need to investigate the matter in more detail.

The Chairperson: I would have thought that this was the appropriate time to do so, as well as checking with the Irish authorities.

Are members content with clause 87?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clauses 88 to 95, about which we have not received communication.

Mr Doyle: The clauses relate to persons acting as a trustee while disqualified. In addition, miscellaneous provisions cover other matters such as trustee remuneration for providing services to a charity, the power to relieve trustees from liability for breach of trust or duty, and trustees' indemnity insurance.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clauses 88 to 95?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to part 10, clauses 96 to 103, about which we have not received communication.

Mr Doyle: This part of the Bill covers charitable companies. Strictly speaking, charitable companies are regulated under company law; however, there is some crossover between company and charity law, and clauses 96 to 103 cover such instances. For example, if a charity that is a company wishes to wind up, it would have to seek the charity commission's consent; or if a company wishes to alter its objects clauses, consent would be required from the charity commission. The provision in those clauses is to protect charities.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clauses 96 to 103?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 104.

Mr Doyle: Clause 104 deals with the annual audit or examination of accounts of charitable companies. The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) asked why the provisions of clause 104 do not apply to company law. Charities that are companies are generally covered by company law; however, there is some crossover. The Companies Act 2006 — which applies to the whole of the UK — is being phased in over a long time, and amendments will be made in order to dovetail company and charity legislation in England and Wales. The Department will closely monitor the situation, and clause 181 will provide a power to make such amendments to the Charities Bill.

The Chairperson: Has NICVA been made aware of that rationale?

Mr Doyle: It was added to the Committee for Social Development's comments for public consultation. Therefore it has been recorded.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 104?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clauses 105 to 108, about which we have not received communication.

Mr Doyle: These clauses deal with a new legal entity that will be introduced by the charity commission: a charitable incorporated organisation that will have the same status as a company, but, instead of the Companies Registry being the lead regulator, as is the case for charities that are companies, the charity commission will be the lead regulator. That will cut down on much overburdensome regulation and on dual regulation by the Companies Registry and the charity commission. It is an extra facility for which Northern Ireland charities

might apply, and charities that are companies will be able to convert to a charitable incorporated organisation.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clauses 105 to 108?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clauses 109 and 110, about which we have not received communication.

Mr Doyle: Clauses 109 and 110 cover the process of registering and making an application to be a charitable incorporated organisation to the charity commission for Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clauses 109 and 110?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clauses 111 to 117, about which we have received no communication.

Mr Doyle: Clauses 111 to 117 cover conversion, amalgamation and transfer to a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO) from either a charitable company or an industrial provident society. It enables such an organisation to transfer if it wishes.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clauses 111 to 117?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 118.

Mr Doyle: Clause 118 covers the winding up, insolvency and dissolution of charitable incorporated organisations.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 118?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 119, about which we have received communication.

Mr Doyle: Clause 119 provides a power to transfer all property of an unincorporated charity to one or more charitable incorporated organisations. We received communication from Cleaver Fulton Rankin Solicitors regarding the transfer of designated land in this process. We have taken legal advice and will consider that point. Designated land is land that has been designated to a charity for a specific purpose.

Ms Lo: CO3 also had an issue with clause 119.

Mr Doyle: Where comments have been made in support of a clause, I have either simply stated that there has been no response or I have mentioned the

comment; but where there is a salient point that needs to be addressed, I have provided a response.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 119?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clauses 120 and 121.

Mr Doyle: Clauses 120 and 121 cover miscellaneous provisions relating to charitable incorporated organisations.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clauses 120 and 121?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 122 of part 12, about which we have received communication similar to that received concerning clause 119.

Mr Doyle: Clause 122 concerns the power to transfer all property of an unincorporated association to another charity with like purposes. It is simply a provision in the Bill to allow that to happen.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 122?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clauses 123 and 124.

Mr Doyle: Those clauses simply concern general provisions related to clause 122.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clauses 123 and 124?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 125.

Mr Doyle: Clause 125 provides for the power to replace the purposes of an unincorporated charity. An unincorporated charity is a charity that is not a company.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 125?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 126, about which we have received communication.

Mr Doyle: Clause 126 concerns provision of a power for the charity commission for Northern Ireland to modify the power of procedures of an unincorporated charity.

The Chairperson: The Charity Commission for England and Wales commented on the implications for

schemes made for common investment funds, which would have similar implications for our regime.

Mr Doyle: The reason that I have not provided a response to that comment is that we have noted it and will consider it.

The Chairperson: From an initial reading, will it have implications for a charity commission in Northern Ireland, or is that something that you are still considering?

Mr Doyle: We will monitor and consider it. The Charity Commission for England and Wales has not been specific in its comments. If the Charity Commission for England and Wales were to amend the 2006 Act, the Department for Social Development would follow suit.

The Chairperson: Does that mean that you are not sure because they are not sure?

Mr Doyle: Yes. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: If an amendment is required, will you come back to the Committee?

Mr Doyle: Yes.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 126?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 127, about which we have correspondence.

Mr Doyle: Clause 127 will permit, in certain circumstances, an unincorporated charity to spend a proportion or all of its endowment fund as capital. That might happen is if the charity were to transfer assets to another charity or if it were to wind up. That charity might have an endowment fund that it could not touch; however, if a resolution were passed and the charity commission for Northern Ireland were notified, clause 127 would allow it access to such a fund.

We have consulted our legal advisers on the comment that the Charity Commission for England and Wales made on clause 127, and we will consider it.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 127?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clauses 128 and 129.

Mr Doyle: Clauses 128 and 129 will permit, in certain circumstances, larger unincorporated charities to spend capital given for a particular purpose or subject to a special trust.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clauses 128 and 129?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 130 of part 13, about which the Committee has received communication.

Mr Doyle: Chapter 1 of part 13 covers public charitable collections. In Northern Ireland the PSNI regulates street collections and most door-to-door collections and issues the permits that allow those collections. The Bill makes provision for the public charitable collections function to pass to the charity commission for Northern Ireland. The PSNI said that it is content with that, as it would rather have one central body regulating street and door-to-door collections.

The Chairperson: Are you aware that the Association of Charity Shops is concerned that it will have to cross what it regards as a three-fold barrier?

Mr Doyle: Yes, and I will talk about that when we come to the relevant clause. Last week, I discussed the clause in question with the Association of Charity Shops. The association appeared to be content at the time; however, having thought about it, it has decided to write to the Committee to express its concerns.

The Chairperson: What is the position with regard to Internet fundraising?

Mr Doyle: Part 13 will regulate charitable collections in public places and door-to-door collections through a system of licences and permits that will be issued through the charity commission for Northern Ireland. That issue sparked a great deal of comment. Generally, regulation is welcome; however, concerns were raised that local councils would be best placed to issue permits because they have a better knowledge of where collections are carried out. In England and Wales, the Charity Commission is the lead regulator for public collections; the Office of the Scottish Regulator performs that function in Scotland. However, the local councils issue the permits.

Due to the review of public administration, those functions cannot be passed to local councils in Northern Ireland. The present legislative framework places those functions — the regulation of street collections and other public collections — with the charity commission for Northern Ireland. However, the option exists of passing the issuing of permits to local councils in future.

The Chairperson: How does that address Internet fundraising?

Mr Doyle: The question was asked why lotteries and Internet fundraising were excluded from the Bill. Lotteries are governed by separate legislation and are regulated by local councils.

Mr McGivern: They are governed by the Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

Mr Doyle: Many organisations find collecting or soliciting on the Internet very difficult to police. The Internet is evolving, so we will have to keep a watchful eye on it.

Mr McGivern: We will have to work with other regulators in the UK and Ireland to monitor their approach, and perhaps introduce further legislation to police Internet fundraising.

Mr A Maginness: What is the position in England and Scotland on charitable fundraising on the Internet? Is charitable fundraising covered in their charities legislation or is it regulated by other legislation?

Mr Doyle: The Charities Bill reflects legislation in England and Wales.

Mr McGivern: The Charities Act 2006 in England and Wales does not cover Internet fundraising. There is separate legislation in Northern Ireland that covers gaming and betting, and I think that the same situation applies in England and Wales.

Mr A Maginness: Surely gaming and betting is a separate category of Internet use. We are talking about specific fundraising by charities here.

The Chairperson: We are talking about Northern Ireland-based charities' use of the Internet for fundraising purposes and how that would come under the provisions of the Bill.

Mr A Maginness: There seems to be a gap in the Bill. Indeed, Internet fundraising may be too complex a matter for the Charities Bill to deal with. How do other jurisdictions regulate such activity? You are probably unsighted on that — and it is unfair to ask such a question now — but it would be useful if the departmental officials could get back to us on the issue.

Mr McGivern: That is a valid point. We are not aware of legislation in the UK or Ireland that deals specifically with Internet fundraising. We must meet the Committee and decide whether such legislation is required in Northern Ireland; having listened to what has been said today, it might be needed.

The Chairperson: It sounds like an agenda item for a British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference meeting.

[Laughter.]

Mr A Maginness: It certainly does.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 130?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 131.

Mr Doyle: Clause 131 covers charitable appeals that are not public charitable collections. The clause clarifies that a charitable appeal is not a public

charitable collection if that appeal is made during a public meeting; in a churchyard; on land used for public worship; or on land that is enclosed.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 131?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 132, about which we have received no communication.

Mr Doyle: Clause 132 provides clarification of the terms used in this part of the Bill.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 132?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clauses 133 and 134, on which the Committee has received correspondence.

Mr Doyle: Clauses 133 and 134 cover restrictions that apply to conducting door-to-door or public collections, such as when a person has not obtained the appropriate permit.

The Chairperson: There are concerns that the charity commission will have limited local knowledge; should local authorities issue permits instead?

Mr Doyle: The Department could not transfer that function to local councils because of the review of public administration (RPA). There is a provision that, at some future stage [*inaudible due to mobile phone interference*].

Mr McGivern: In line with other RPA announcements, the Department intends to consider the transfer of that function, and if the charity commission for Northern Ireland is established later in 2008, one of its priorities will be to examine that matter.

The Chairperson: I look forward to that. Are members content with clauses 133 and 134?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 135.

Mr Doyle: Clause 135 covers an exemption for local short-term collections. A public charitable collection is exempt if it is local, short term and the promoter notifies the charity commission for Northern Ireland before the collection.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 135?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 136.

Mr Doyle: Clause 136 covers the method of applying to the charity commission for a public

collection certificate. The PSNI feels that it should be notified when a collection takes place in a relevant district. The Department recognises that it is important for the charity commission to liaise effectively with the PSNI, and that relationship will be defined in a proposed memorandum of understanding to be drawn up between those two bodies.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 136?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 137.

Mr Doyle: Clause 137 covers the determination of applications and the issuing of certificates. The clause requires that the charity commission, on receipt of an application for a public collection certificate, must, after enquiries, either grant or refuse that certificate.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 137?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clauses 138 to 141.

Mr Doyle: Clause 138 covers the grounds for refusing to issue a certificate. Those grounds include instances when the applicant has been convicted of a relevant offence, has failed to demonstrate due care and diligence, and so on.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clauses 138 to 141?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 142.

Mr Doyle: Clause 142 explains how a person can apply to the charity commission for a permit to conduct a public charitable collection. The Department was informed that the Association of Charity Shops had made some comments to the Committee. I met representatives from the association last week, and I think that the Committee also received correspondence from the association yesterday or this morning.

The Chairperson: In correspondence received by the Committee, the Association of Charity Shops states:

“The proposed system will introduce a three-tier system of certification, permitting and notification requirements on charity shops carrying out collections. This would create an additional layer of regulation which is not present elsewhere in the UK.”

Is that accurate?

Mr Doyle: That part is accurate. However, the rest of the sentence states:

“nor in Northern Ireland at present”.

The House to House Charitable Collections Act (Northern Ireland) 1952 currently regulates door-to-door collections.

The Chairperson: Is the “three-tier system” present at the moment?

Mr Doyle: No, it is not.

The Chairperson: However, that system will be introduced under the current terms of the Bill.

Mr Doyle: Yes, it will.

The Chairperson: The point is that that is not the case in England and Wales.

Mr Doyle: In England and Wales, the permits are issued by councils. We do not have that facility as yet. That is the difference. There is not the same level of notification to the charity commission.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that, if under the review of public administration there is a transfer to local government — without prejudice to what may or may not happen — the position on charity shops and collections will be identical to that which pertains in England and Wales under the legislation there?

Mr Doyle: It is different in England and Wales, where there is a simple requirement to give councils notice of public collections. Under the system proposed in the Charities Bill, a certificate of fitness will be issued, followed by a permit specifying the duration of the collection and the manner in which it will take place, and the charity commission will be notified.

Clause 143(3) allows the charity commission, when it issues the permit, to decide on the manner and the timescale of the permit. In effect, a permit for a charity shop association or an individual charity shop could be open-ended. However, that provision would be the subject of a discussion between the charity commission and the relevant charities to decide which it would operate.

Mr A Maginness: Do you think that, under the proposed legislation, an open-ended permit could be given? Is there anything that would prevent that?

Mr Doyle: No, there is not. There is a power under clause 143(3), which authorises the charity commission to make a decision on the timescale for the permit, whether it be for a year, five years or open-ended. There is scope in the Bill for the charity commission to do that.

Mr McGivern: It also recognises the difference between someone organising an annual collection or a flag day, and a charity shop that collects 365 days a year.

Mr A Maginness: That seems reasonable, Chairperson, if that power is contained there.

The Chairperson: As a result of last week’s meeting with representatives of the Association of

Charity Shops, and the issues that have been raised today, would it be possible for you to have another meeting with them to try to allay their concerns? It is obvious that their concerns have not been allayed; after they met you, they wrote to the Committee, which is an indication that they are not happy.

Mr Doyle: They were not happy with the word of an official. To be honest, however, it is in the Bill. The scope is there, but that did not appear to satisfy the association. The set-up in Northern Ireland is different to the set-up in England, Wales and Scotland. The Northern Ireland legislation is different. England, Wales and Scotland do not have legislation covering street collections or door-to-door collections, including the black bin bag or goods-in-kind collections.

The Chairperson: I got the impression, from their communication, that their concern was not so much that there is a different legislative set-up, but that charity shops in Northern Ireland would have a more complicated set-up to deal with than their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales. If you can alleviate their concerns on that, I suspect that the issue will be a dead one.

Mr Doyle: Much of this legislation reflects the situation in England and Wales, except where powers are devolved to local councils. There is scope in clause 143(3), but it may be a matter for the Association of Charity Shops, once the legislation is up and running, and advice and guidance are available, to meet the charity commission to decide the best way forward. The Department has certainly noted the association’s concerns. I will meet representatives of the association again and flag the matter up. We cannot prejudge the charity commission’s decision. It will be an independent body.

The Chairperson: Therefore, the Department will meet representatives from the association again. Are Members content with clause 142?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: With shall now move on to clause 143.

Mr Doyle: Under clause 143, the charity commission for Northern Ireland, on receipt of an application for a public collection permit, and after making such enquiries as it sees fit, will either issue a permit or refuse the application.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 143?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clauses 144 to 146. The Committee has received communication on permits, which are dealt with by those clauses.

Mr Doyle: Clauses 144 to 146 cover the grounds for refusal of a permit; for example, when the charity commission for Northern Ireland is of the opinion that a collection would cause undue inconvenience to members of the public, householders or businesses. It also covers the withdrawal or variation, and so forth, of a permit and explains the circumstances in which the charity commission can withdraw, attach a condition or vary a public collection permit. It also covers the grounds for appeals against the commission's decision to refuse a permit.

The Chairperson: Are Members content with clauses 144 to 146?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 147.

Mr Doyle: Clause 147 allows the Department to make regulations that relate to public charitable collections.

The Chairperson: Are Members content with clause 147?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 148.

Mr Doyle: Clause 148 explains offences that could be connected to any charitable appeals; for example, the improper use of badges or documentation.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 148?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clauses 149 to 155.

Mr Doyle: This part of the Bill covers the control of fund-raising for charitable institutions. Much of it applies to professional fund-raisers and the regulations under which they engage with charities in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clauses 149 to 155?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 156, which deals with regulations about fund-raising.

Mr Doyle: Clause 156 provides the Department with powers to make regulations for fund-raising.

The Chairperson: What is the difference between the charity commission's role with regard to fund-raising and that of the Fundraising Standards Board?

Mr Doyle: I have met officials from the Fundraising Standards Board on several occasions. Its role is to promote self-regulation in the charitable sector in England, Wales and Scotland, and it wishes to carry that through into Northern Ireland. It believes that

clause 157 will assist it in promoting the opportunity for self-regulation in fund-raising in Northern Ireland. Again, the Department cannot prejudge a decision of the charity commission for Northern Ireland. When the commission is established, it would consider the matter with the Fundraising Standards Board.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 156?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 157.

Mr Doyle: Clause 157 provides the Department with the power to make regulations as necessary to regulate charity fund-raising.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 157?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 158.

Mr Doyle: Clause 158 is an explanation of the terms that are used in this part of the Bill.

The Chairperson: There is nothing controversial in the clause. Are members content with clause 158?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 159.

Mr Doyle: Clause 159 introduces a new power that has not previously existed in Northern Ireland, whereby, under legislation, the Department can give financial assistance to charitable, benevolent and philanthropic institutions — organisations that are not charities. The qualification is that:

“The Department may give financial assistance to any charitable, benevolent or philanthropic institution in respect of any of the institution's activities which directly or indirectly benefit the whole or any part of Northern Ireland.”

The Chairperson: The Committee has received no communication on that clause. Are members content with clause 159?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 160.

Mr Doyle: Clause 160 contains a further explanation of the terms that are used in this part of the Bill.

The Chairperson: Are Members content with clause 160?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move to clauses 161 to 163.

Mr McGivern: Clauses 161 to 163 deal with the register of charity mergers. The commission will keep a record and maintain a register of any charity mergers that take place.

The Chairperson: The Committee has received no communication on those clauses. Are members content with clauses 161 to 163?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 164. The Committee has received correspondence on this clause.

Mr McGivern: Clause 164 covers circumstances in which a charity receives a gift during or after a charity merger. The law firm Cleaver Fulton Rankin has raised a technical issue regarding the risk of a gift not transferring because of time delays. We consider that to be a valid point. The possibility exists that a charity could lose the benefit of a gift if that gift is made during the time between the merger and the registration of that merger. Therefore, the charity commission will have to take note of that issue and ensure that any charity does not suffer a loss because of that time delay.

The Chairperson: That issue was also raised by the Charity Commission for England and Wales. Are members content with clause 164?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clauses 165 and 166.

Mr McGivern: The Committee is very familiar with clauses 165 and 166. They have caused considerable correspondence and oral submissions. Clause 165 provides an exemption from aspects of the Bill in relation to designated religious charities; it is worth pointing out again that it has no impact whatsoever on charity registration. During last week's evidence session with some of the smaller faith-based organisations, it became clear that there was a misconception that they would not be able to register as a charity. This matter is completely separate from registration; it is an exemption that was introduced to recognise the unique structure of faith-based charities. Clause 166 lists the various criteria.

The Chairperson: The Committee has received several items of correspondence on this issue, particularly from smaller groups that may fall outside either the time or numerical criteria. Will you tell the Committee where we are on that issue?

Mr McGivern: The Department has considered all the issues that have been raised. There is a clear need to strike a balance between the charity commission being able to go into a charity where there is evidence of mismanagement or misconduct and carry out a

proper investigation, set against the need to recognise the unique structures in many faith-based organisations in Northern Ireland.

A membership level needs to be set, because there is a possibility of a faith-based charity being set up with very few members — perhaps a bogus charity — which would then be exempt from clauses 33 to 36. That would mean that the charity commission could not carry out an investigation into that charity, remove or suspend trustees, or appoint an interim manager.

It must be made clear that charities must have been established for a set period of time, have proper governance arrangements in place and have a membership level that would inspire confidence that the charity has a structure in place to deal with any problems internally rather than the charity commission having to deal with them.

The membership level was set at 1,000, based on Scottish legislation, and also taking the different population levels into account. In Scotland, the level was originally set at 10,000 but was reduced to 3,000 during stage 2 of the Bill. The Department has put the figure of 1,000 in the Bill, but it is open to hearing the Committee's views.

There is no consensus on the number of smaller Churches in Northern Ireland, because there is no register of those Churches. The Department has spoken to representatives of the Irish Council of Churches and the Churches' Community Work Alliance, but it is very difficult to get an overall picture of the numbers involved.

Mr Craig: You will find that you will never get a register with independent Churches. It is a contradiction in terms: a Church is not independent if it is registered. Should the charity commission not be considering an opt-out clause for independent Churches with regard to the membership level of 1,000? The commission could deal with individual cases; it could make a judgement of whether a charity is a bona fide Church or religious organisation. If the charity meets all the other criteria, it can be exempt from the 1,000 members requirement. That would be a sensible way to deal with the issue.

Mr McGivern: Mr Craig, are you saying that there should be no numerical figure at all?

Mr Craig: No; I am saying that, given the circumstances of independent Churches, the commission should have the power to waive the 1,000 figure under certain conditions, if the charity meets the rest of the criteria.

Mr McGivern: There is concern that that could leave the system open to abuse. Who would decide whether a small Church or small faith-based organisation is bona fide? The charity commission

would have to satisfy itself, which raises concern that there would not be an adequate level of assurance for an organisation with a very few members that does not have sufficient governance arrangements and has not been long established. Do you think that lowering the figure of 1,000 would bring in a number of the Churches to which you refer?

The Chairperson: The problem is that, regardless of what the membership level is, there will be a small number of Churches that are just above or below the threshold. We do not want a situation where Churches are trying to recruit an extra member to get above the threshold or lose one to get under it. If small Churches or religious groups that are going to register as a charity meet the governance requirements, why is it necessary to have a membership threshold and the requirement that the group has been established for a minimum of 10 years?

Mr McGivern: Clauses 33 to 36 protect charities. Therefore, if there is an internal issue of misconduct in a small Church with, say, 50 members, it is beneficial to that Church if the charity commission resolves the issue instead of being left to deal with the matter itself. The commission will have the expertise to resolve the matter for that Church or faith-based organisation. If that small Church were exempt from clauses 33 to 36, would there be public confidence that the matter could be resolved internally and that it would have sufficient structures to do so? Although the Department has total confidence that the large, long-established denominations in Northern Ireland are capable of resolving such matters internally, it is concerned that some small Church organisations would not have the capacity or the skill to resolve those issues. That could lead to a loss of public confidence in the charity or the work of the charity commission.

The Chairperson: That is what happens at present.

Mr McGivern: There are no measures in place at present.

The Chairperson: Therefore, if allegations of inappropriate conduct are made, there is no current resolution.

Mr McGivern: That is correct — there is nothing in place at the moment.

The Chairperson: How would leaving small organisations to deal with problems themselves make matters worse?

Mr McGivern: The purpose of clauses 33 to 36 is to enable the charity commission, when it is established, to resolve matters that arise. At present, there is no mechanism to do that apart from police investigations. If we set a barrier between zero and 1,000 members, what would be the appropriate number?

Mr Brady: You make an inherent assumption that, the larger an organisation is, the better equipped it is to deal with problems. That is not necessarily the case if one considers the statutory organisations with which we deal. The premise on which the membership level is based is not very strong. It is an arbitrary figure that should be examined. Small organisations are as adept at handling internal problems as are larger organisations. I make that judgement from my dealings with statutory organisations.

Mr McGivern: The Department accepts that and is open to suggestions. There is some assurance in the 10-year establishment and criteria under clause 166(3) (e), which deals with internal governance arrangements. Therefore, the charity commission would have to be assured that there were proper governance arrangements in place before charitable status could be granted. That is a potential safeguard.

In Scotland, the feeling was that the membership should not be lower than 3,000. Indeed, only nine or 10 applications have been received.

Mr Brady: My point is that if all the other criteria are fulfilled, the numbers are not really that important.

The Chairperson: That is the point.

Ms Lo: I still think that that criterion is quite divisive and will lead to the creation of a hierarchy of Churches. The implication is that some Churches — the main Churches — are more trustworthy than the smaller Churches and therefore can avoid abiding by the provisions in those clauses.

Mr McGivern: We are not saying that they are more trustworthy. We are simply saying that they have had the structures in place, over a period of time, to deal with those types of issues. A small newly established Church would take some time to find its feet and put governance arrangements in place, and it may, therefore, not have the appropriate structures in place to deal with those issues.

Ms Lo: Some faith groups may have been established for more than 10 years, but they could never achieve a membership of 1,000 people and will, therefore, never attain that religious charity status. People see this as a matter of principle. They do not understand why some Churches should be allowed to attain that religious charity status, while others are not.

The Chairperson: To Committee members and those who have made the effort to communicate with the Committee, the assumption seems to be that Churches that have over 1,000 members and that have been established for at least 10 years have an appropriate level of governance and expertise, while those that have not reached that level and do not meet those specific criteria do not have that expertise.

Mr McGivern: Potentially, yes.

The Chairperson: Potentially, yes. If a line could be inserted in that clause that focuses on expertise and governance, irrespective of the size of the organisation, people would be more prepared to concede on the issue. At the moment, there is concern about this arbitrary level — the idea that 50·1% is in, but 49·9% is out.

Mr McGivern: There is a possibility that the Department will reconsider that criterion. In light of the number of representations that the Committee has received, and the views that members have expressed today, we can perhaps consider reducing the figure of 1,000, or perhaps removing that particular criterion and leaving the others in.

Mr Craig: I can fully understand why the criterion for a Church to be established for a number of years has been included, because the system could be abused in certain circumstances. The figure has been set at 10 years, but even if it were five years, in all honesty, how many criminals do we know who would set up an organisation for five or 10 years simply to defraud the system? It is incredibly unlikely that that would happen — it would probably never happen. We are all making the same argument today — the numbers are not relevant. If an organisation has met all the governance criteria, is a bona fide religious organisation and has been established for a period of five to 10 years, what are the chances of its having been set up to defraud the system? They are practically zero.

Account must also be taken of the fact that clause 166 is an exemption clause. If a Church's governing body does not initially deal with any untoward behaviour in its organisation, the commission has the authority and right to deal with it, anyway. Therefore, the clause simply allows a Church to deal with a matter under its own strictures first of all. I am mystified as to why a criterion of a membership of 1,000 has been included, because the charity commission can take over in the end in any case.

The Chairperson: Mr McGivern, just before Jonathan Craig spoke, you intimated that, having read the communications and listened to the contributions today from members, the Department would revisit the clause. If members are content to do so, we could leave it at that for now, and you could get back to us about that provision.

On that basis, are members content with clauses 165 and 166?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 167.

Mr McGivern: Clause 167 deals with institutions that are not charities under the law of Northern Ireland but which are UK-wide charities. It sets up two different forms of registration. Clause 16 deals with

the registration of charities that operate under the law of Northern Ireland; clause 167 is a different category. It deals with charities that are registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales or with the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator. They will also be required to register their activities in Northern Ireland and report them to the charity commission for Northern Ireland. We were legally advised to change the wording of the Bill to ensure that there was a distinction between clause-16 charities that operate under the law here and which register here with the commission and those that operate on a UK-wide basis.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 167?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clauses 168 to 178.

Mr McGivern: Clauses 168 to 178 deal with miscellaneous provisions relating to such matters as the manner of giving notice of a charity meeting, the supply by the charity commission of documents, and the public inspection of those documents.

The Chairperson: We have received no communication on clauses 168 to 178. Are members content with clauses 168 to 178?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 179, which deals with orders and regulations.

Mr McGivern: We have received no comment on clause 179; it is a standard clause.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 179?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clause 180, about which we have received communication.

Mr McGivern: Clause 180 deals with general interpretation, and it provides an explanation of some of the terms in the Bill. I know that the Committee received some comments about charity trustees.

The Chairperson: The Scottish legislation includes an explanation on the general duties of trustees.

Mr McGivern: The Bill will not cover all the duties and responsibilities of a charity trustee, but it will set out the main duties. We do not want the charity commission to have to change the legislation every time the duties of a trustee change. Following the enactment of the legislation, the charity commission will have to issue advice and guidance to all charities on the roles and responsibilities of a trustee. There is no reason for those roles and responsibilities to appear in the Bill.

The Chairperson: The Scottish authorities thought differently.

Mr McGivern: They did; perhaps they were being overprotective.

The Chairperson: Are members content with clause 180?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to clauses 181 to 186.

Mr McGivern: Clauses 181 to 186 contain miscellaneous provisions relating to the commencement of the Act.

The Chairperson: No correspondence has been received on those clauses. Are members content with clauses 181 to 186?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to schedule 1.

Mr Doyle: Schedule 1 covers the terms of the appointment of the charity commission for Northern Ireland, its remuneration and staffing. NICVA said that the charity commission should be overseen by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland (OCPANI). The appointment of the deputy chief commissioner and three to five commissioners will be carried out through the public appointments procedure and overseen by the code of practice of OCPANI.

The Chairperson: What about the suggestion that two members of the commission should be from a legal background?

Mr Doyle: We have followed the terms of appointment in England and Wales; they are in the Bill. There is a legal requirement that at least one member of a charity appeal tribunals have a legal background. The Department feels that that is sufficient, and it follows the make-up in other types of organisations.

The Chairperson: What about the suggestion that the commission be fully independent and directly accountable to the Executive?

Mr Doyle: As a non-departmental public body, the charity commission for Northern Ireland will be accountable to the Department for Social Development. The Minister for Social Development will lay an annual report before the Assembly for consideration.

The Chairperson: Therefore it will be directly accountable to the Executive. Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to schedule 2.

Mr Doyle: Schedule 2 covers the membership and terms of appointment of the charity tribunal.

The Chairperson: Are members content with schedule 2?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to schedule 3.

Mr Doyle: Schedule 3 covers the appeals and applications that can be made to the charity tribunal. In effect, it is a list of decisions that the charity commission for Northern Ireland can make and against which people can appeal.

The Chairperson: Are members content with schedule 3?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to schedule 4.

Mr Doyle: Schedule 4 sets out that the charity commission for Northern Ireland may refer any question it considers appropriate to the charity tribunal for consideration.

The Chairperson: Are members content with schedule 4?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to schedule 5.

Mr Doyle: Schedule 5 defines connected persons for the purposes of section 58(2), which covers the disposal of charitable property and land.

The Chairperson: Are members content with schedule 5?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to schedule 6

Mr Doyle: Schedule 6 covers the provisions for group accounts.

The Chairperson: Are members content with schedule 6?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to schedule 7, about which the Committee received communication.

Mr Doyle: Schedule 7 concerns further provision for charitable and corporate organisations; it covers the miscellaneous provisions relating to charitable organisations. The comment received from NICVA is similar to the point that it made about the charity commissioners: NICVA considers that the duties of the trustees should be incorporated in this schedule. As Mr

McGivern said, the Department considers that such guidance should be issued by the charity commission rather than being embedded in the legislation.

The Chairperson: Are members content with schedule 7?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to schedule 8.

Mr Doyle: Schedule 8 covers minor and consequential amendments to charity-related legislation.

The Chairperson: Are members content with schedule 8?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We shall now move on to schedule 9.

Mr Doyle: Schedule 9 repeals all previous charity-related legislation.

The Chairperson: Are members content with schedule 9?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: It looks as if the light has gone out completely.

Mr A Maginness: Mr Chairperson, may I ask a question about clause 167? Is it mandatory for charities that have registered elsewhere to register in Northern Ireland?

Mr McGivern: Yes; even those charities that are already registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales must, under clause 167, register in Northern Ireland.

Mr A Maginness: That is all I wanted to know. Thank you.

Mr A Maginness: Mr McGivern and Mr Doyle, thank you for your assistance today. The task is arduous, but we are getting there slowly but surely.

Written Answers

This section contains the written answers to questions tabled by Members. The content of the responses is as received at the time from the relevant Minister or representative of the Assembly Commission, and it has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process or changed.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 29 February 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Anti-Poverty and Good Relations

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail how the £3.6 million, allocated in the draft Budget for anti-poverty and good relations, will be shared between these programmes.
(AQW 2339/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): The £3.6 million figure referred to within the Member's question relates to the additional funding allocated to anti-poverty and good relations for 2010-11, the third and final financial year covered by the current draft budget.

The total additional sum allocated within the draft budget to poverty and good relations is £7.724m. The total allocation will be shared between the two work areas as follows:

Year	Anti-Poverty	Good Relations	Total
08/09	£100k	£974k	£1.074m
09/10	£100k	£2.950m	£3.050m
10/11	£100k	£3.500m	£3.600m

Whilst both allocations are under a Resource Heading the finance will be used by the Department in different ways.

OFMDFM has both the policy lead and the primary responsibility for funding good relations. The funds allocated to good relations will resource a programme for cohesion sharing and integration, the detail of

which will be consistent with the pledge of office to 'promote the interests of the whole community towards the goal of a shared future and a prosperous, peaceful and settled society.'

Detailed plans for a shared and better future are currently being prepared; building on the good and valuable work that has gone before.

OFMDFM has overall policy responsibility for poverty and social inclusion, however funding is primarily provided through other Department's budgets. The £100k per annum Anti-Poverty allocation is to resource spending related directly to this policy remit. Individual Departments' budget allocations include expenditure on programmes and actions which impact either directly or indirectly on the issue of poverty and social inclusion.

MLA Meetings

Mr Ross asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of meetings it has held with Members of the Legislative Assembly since May 2007.
(AQW 3745/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Details of the meetings since May 2007 are shown in the table below:

Number of meetings First Minister and deputy First Minister (in an official capacity) have held with Assembly Committees or Chair/Vice Chair of Committees	3
Number of meetings officials have held with Assembly Committees	23
Number of meetings officials have held with MLAs (excluding meetings with Assembly Committees)	2

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland

Mr Savage asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, with specific reference to the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2, to outline which projects are running (a) on time; and (b) on budget.
(AQW 3889/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The information requested is attached. This provides details for projects specifically mentioned within the Investment Strategy Northern Ireland 2008-2018 as approved by the Assembly on 28 January. Details are provided in the form you requested.

INVESTMENT STRATEGY 2 – PROJECTS IN PROCUREMENT OR DELIVERY – ON TIME

Department	Name of Project
Health, Social Services and Public Safety	New Health and Care Centres at Shankhill, Andersonstown and Portadown
	New regional adolescent psychiatric unit at Forster Green,
	Phase A of the Ulster Hospital - includes maternity unit, renal unit , car parking, multi-storey block with critical care, CSSD, theatres and laboratories
	Second phase of the Royal Victoria Hospital redevelopment - multi-storey critical care building
	New Acute Hospital near Enniskillen,
	New local enhanced hospital at Omagh
	New local enhanced Downe hospital
Employment and Learning	North West Regional College, L/Derry
	Northern Regional College, Newtownabbey
	Belfast Metropolitan College, Springvale
	South Eastern Regional College, Bangor and Newtownards
Finance & Personnel	e-HR Programme (HR Connect)
Regional Development	Roads Service Design Build Finance Operate (DBFO) Package 1
	Roads Service DBFO Package 2
	An enhanced ferry service for Rathlin Island by 2009
	Completing the Belfast Sewer Project by 2010 in order to significantly reduce the risks of flooding in part of the City
	Upgrading water treatment and distribution infrastructure to comply with existing water quality regulations across the region by 2014. This will include service commencement of Project Alpha.
	Upgrading waste water treatment infrastructure to bring the region into compliance with current EU standards by 2014. This will include service commencement of Project Omega.
Social Development	Jobs and benefits Accommodation Project

Department	Name of Project
Education Northern Ireland	Bangor Academy/ Nendrum College (Comber) PPP Project
	Holy Cross College (Strabane) PPP Project
	Drumragh Integrated College, Omagh
	Ballyholme Primary School, Bangor
	St Patrick's Primary School, Saul
	Assumption Grammar School, Ballynahinch
	St Dominic's High School, Belfast
	Convent Grammar School, Enniskillen (Final Phase)
	Maralin Primary School, Magheralin
	Killen Primary School, Castlederg
	Fourtowns Primary School, Ahogill
	Carnalridge Primary School, Portrush
	Moorfields Primary School, Ballymena
	Brookfield Special School
	St Peters Primary School, Cloughreagh
	Burnfoot, Largy, Dungiven Primary School
	St Colmans College, Newry
	Waringstown Primary School
	Ballymacrickett Primary School
	Abbey Grammar School, Newry
	Victoria Primary School, Ballyhalbert
	Ballinderry Primary School
	Pond Park Primary School, Lisburn

INVESTMENT STRATEGY 2 – PROJECTS IN PROCUREMENT OR DELIVERY – ON BUDGET

Department	Name of Project
Health, Social Services and Public Safety	New Health and Care Centres at Shankhill, Andersonstown and Portadown
	New regional adolescent psychiatric unit at Forster Green,
	Phase A of the Ulster Hospital - includes maternity unit, renal unit, car parking, multi-storey block with critical care, CSSD, theatres and laboratories
	Second phase of the Royal Victoria Hospital redevelopment - multi-storey critical care building
	New Acute Hospital near Enniskillen,
	New local enhanced hospital at Omagh
	New local enhanced Downe hospital
Employment and Learning	South Eastern Regional College - Downpatrick, Ballynahinch and Newcastle campuses.
	South Eastern Regional College - Lisburn campus.
	Belfast Metropolitan College - Titanic Quarter
	Fermanagh Further Educational College
	North West Regional College, L/Derry
	Northern Regional College, Newtownabbey
	Belfast Metropolitan College, Springvale
	South Eastern Regional College, Bangor and Newtownards
Finance & Personnel	Workplace 2010
	Account NI
	e-HR Programme (HR Connect)
Regional Development	Roads Service Design Build Finance Operate (DBFO) Package 1
	Roads Service DBFO Package 2
	An enhanced ferry service for Rathlin Island by 2009
	Completing the Belfast Sewer Project by 2010 in order to significantly reduce the risks of flooding in part of the City
	Upgrading water treatment and distribution infrastructure to comply with existing water quality regulations across the region by 2014. This will include service commencement of Project Alpha.
	Upgrading waste water treatment infrastructure to bring the region into compliance with current EU standards by 2014. This will include service commencement of Project Omega.
Social Development	Jobs and benefits Accommodation Project

Department	Name of Project
Education Northern Ireland	Bangor Academy/ Nendrum College (Comber) PPP Project
	Holy Cross College (Strabane) PPP Project
	Derry Diocesan PPP Project (St Mary's and St Cecilia's Colleges)
	Down & Connor / De La Salle PPP Project (St Mary's Primary, Portglenone; St Joseph's Primary, Carryduff; St Patrick's Grammar, Downpatrick; Our Lady & St Patrick's College, Knock)
	Lagan College (Belfast) / Tor Bank Special School (Dundonald) PPP Project
	Belfast Education and Library Board Strategic Partnering PPP Project - Phase 1 (Orangefield Primary School, Ashfield Girls High School, Belfast Boys Model School, Belfast Model School for Girls, Grosvenor Grammar)
	Drumragh Integrated College, Omagh
	Ballyholme Primary School, Bangor
	St Patrick's Primary School, Saul
	Assumption Grammar School, Ballynahinch
	St Dominic's High School, Belfast
	Convent Grammar School, Enniskillen (Final Phase)
	Maralin Primary School, Magheralin
	Killen Primary School, Castlederg
	Fourtowns Primary School, Ahogill
	Carnalridge Primary School, Portrush
	Moorfields Primary School, Ballymena
	Brookfield Special School
	St Peters Primary School, Cloughreagh
	Burnfoot, Largy, Dungiven Primary School
	St Colmans College, Newry
	Waringstown Primary School
	Ballymacrickett Primary School
	Abbey Grammar School, Newry
	Victoria Primary School, Ballyhalbert
	Ballinderry Primary School
	Pond Park Primary School, Lisburn

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland

Mr Savage asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, with specific reference to the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2, to provide a list of all Public Private Partnerships/Private Finance Initiatives across all sectors; and to detail (i)

the projects which are delayed; (ii) the reasons for delays; and (iii) completion dates for delivering these projects. (AQW 3890/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:
AQW 3890/08 – PPP Projects – Investment Strategy 2008-2018

Department	Name of Project	Completion Date	Delayed Yes/No	Reason for Delay
Health, Social Services and Public Safety	South West Acute Hospital, Enniskillen	2011/2012	No	
	Enhanced Local Hospital Complex, Omagh	2012/2013	No	
Regional Development	Alpha - provision of water	October 2008	No	
	Omega - Improvement in waste water treatment facilities	June 2009	No	
	Roads Service Design Build Finance Operate (DBFO) Package 1	February 2009	No	
	Roads Service DBFO Package 2	December 2010	No	
Finance and Personnel	Workplace 2010	March 2009	Yes	The programme was delayed by a legal challenge issued by an unsuccessful bidder, which has now been resolved.
Employment and Learning	South Eastern Regional College - Downpatrick, Ballynahinch and Newcastle campuses.	April 2010	Yes	Financial failure of one of the bidders at Invitation to Negotiate (ITN) stage, which required them to be re-qualified.
	South Eastern Regional College - Lisburn campus.	April 2010	Yes	Financial failure of one of the bidders at Invitation to Negotiate (ITN) stage, which required them to be re-qualified, plus purchase of additional land to offer a better solution.
	Belfast Metropolitan College - Titanic Quarter	September 2010	Yes	A number of complex negotiation matters. Securing an appropriate Head Lease for land Meeting Planning Conditions Finalising land values.
Education	Bangor Academy / Nendrum College (Comber) PPP Project	Nendrum-March 2008 Bangor-May 2008	No	
	Holy Cross College (Strabane) PPP Project	October 2008	No	
	Derry Diocesan PPP Project (St Mary's and St Cecilia's Colleges)	2009/10	Yes	Full business case delayed due to the need to ensure compliance with revised guidance on PPPs.
	Down & Connor / De La Salle PPP Project (St Mary's Primary, Portglenone; St Joseph's Primary, Carryduff; St Patrick's Grammar, Downpatrick; Our Lady & St Patrick's College, Knock)	2010/11	Yes	Full business case delayed due to the need to ensure compliance with revised guidance on PPPs.
	Lagan College (Belfast) / Tor Bank Special School (Dundonald) PPP Project	2010/11	Yes	The need to resolve site issues at Lagan College.

Department	Name of Project	Completion Date	Delayed Yes/No	Reason for Delay
	Belfast Education and Library Board Strategic Partnering PPP Project - Phase 1 (Orangefield Primary School, Ashfield Girls High School, Belfast Boys Model School, Belfast Model School for Girls, Grosvenor Grammar)	2010/11	Yes	Project is part of proposed partnering arrangement and proceeded more slowly than anticipated because of increased scale and complexity.

Communication Access

Mr P Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister 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 3990/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Within OFMDFM, the following facilities are available to assist those who are hearing impaired i.e. deaf or hard of hearing:

(i)	Facilities which allow hard of hearing and deaf people to access services provided by the department.	(a) Text phone; (b) Speech to text operators (electronic notetakers), provided for meetings and events when required and when the Department is made aware of the need in advance – this service is provided by Royal National Institute for the Deaf; (c) British and Irish sign language translators. Similarly, British and Irish sign language translators are available for meetings and events as appropriate.
(ii)	Format or method of communication involved	
(iii)	How deaf and hard of hearing people are made aware of the services available and how to access them.	The text phone number, located within the Equality Directorate, is printed on all publications issued by the department to facilitate participation and communication with officials; the number is also listed in the Government Offices section of the BT Phonebook and Yellow Pages (under Equality) and is listed under the Contact Us section within the Disability Unit pages on the OFMDFM website.

Children and Young People

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail who will make up the Ministerial Subcommittee on Children and Young People.

(AQW 4040/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: All Ministers in the Executive, as well as representatives from the NIO and the Northern Ireland Court Service, have been invited to the first meeting of the Ministerial Subcommittee on Children and Young People, during which attendance at future meetings will be discussed. It is intended that the agenda would indicate the required attendance for future meetings although any Minister can attend if he or she so wishes.

Planning Appeals Commission

Miss McIlveen asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the recommended length of time it will take for a decision, following the lodgement of appeal papers to the Planning Appeals Commission.

(AQW 4091/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Planning Appeals Commission is a tribunal Non Departmental Public Body. Given its independent tribunal status, it is appropriate for its Chief Commissioner to provide a response directly to you, and we understand she has written to you in the following terms:

“The Commission has various performance measures and targets relating to the timescales which have been set for the issuing of appeal decisions. The Commission aims to decide 80% of appeals by formal hearing within 34 weeks, 80% of appeals by informal hearing within 27 weeks and 80% of appeals by written representations within 24 weeks. The sheer volume of appeals, which the Commission has received over the 24 months, has made it impossible for the Commission to achieve these targets.”

OFMDFM is aware of the build-up of appeals in the Planning Appeals Commission and is fully committed to providing it with the resources required to address the backlog. The additional funding allocations for PAC in the Budget 2008-2011 will provide the Chief

Commissioner with the funding certainty to enable her to recruit additional commissioners. This additional funding has the potential to fund a significant number of additional commissioners, although the actual number to be appointed will be for the Chief Commissioner to determine, taking account of the Commission's capacity to manage a greatly increased complement and also subject to the availability of suitable people from within a limited and specialised market. Arrangements are already under way to deliver a competition for commissioners.

Planning Appeals Commission

Miss McIlveen asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of planning appeals received by the Planning Appeals Commission, in relation to the Ards Borough Council area, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 4092/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Planning Appeals Commission is a tribunal Non Departmental Public Body. Given its independent tribunal status, it is appropriate for its Chief Commissioner to provide a response directly to you, and we understand she has written to you in the following terms:

"I have set out in the following table, the total number of appeals received, determinations issued and the average length of time taken by the Planning Appeals Commission to issue a determination in each of the last five years, in relation to appeals received from the Ards Borough Council area."

Year	Number of Appeals Received	Number of Decisions Issued	Average Time (weeks)
01/04/03- 31/03/04	31	31	27
01/04/04- 31/03/05	62	61	29
01/04/05- 31/03/06	49	49	44
01/04/06- 31/03/07	85	30	68
01/04/07- 18/02/08	18	0	N/A

OFMDFM is aware of the build-up of appeals in the Planning Appeals Commission and is fully committed to providing it with the resources required to address the backlog. The additional funding allocations for PAC in the Budget 2008-2011 will provide the Chief Commissioner with the funding certainty to enable her to recruit additional commissioners. This additional funding has the potential to fund a significant number of additional commissioners, although the actual number to be appointed will be for the Chief Commissioner to determine, taking account of the Commission's capacity to manage a greatly increased complement and also subject to the availability of suitable people from within

a limited and specialised market. Arrangements are already under way to deliver a competition for commissioners.

Planning Appeals Commission

Miss McIlveen asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to appeals received by the Planning Appeals Commission for the Ards Borough Council area, to detail: (i) the number that have had determinations issued; and (ii) the average length of time that elapsed between lodging the application and a determination being made, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 4093/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Planning Appeals Commission is a tribunal Non Departmental Public Body. Given its independent tribunal status, it is appropriate for its Chief Commissioner to provide a response directly to you, and we understand she has written to you in the following terms:

"I have set out in the following table, the total number of appeals received, determinations issued and the average length of time taken by the Planning Appeals Commission to issue a determination in each of the last five years, in relation to appeals received from the Ards Borough Council area."

Year	Number of Appeals Received	Number of Decisions Issued	Average Time (weeks)
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01/04/05- 31/03/06	49	49	44
01/04/06- 31/03/07	85	30	68
01/04/07- 18/02/08	18	0	N/A

OFMDFM is aware of the build-up of appeals in the Planning Appeals Commission and is fully committed to providing it with the resources required to address the backlog. The additional funding allocations for PAC in the Budget 2008-2011 will provide the Chief Commissioner with the funding certainty to enable her to recruit additional commissioners. This additional funding has the potential to fund a significant number of additional commissioners, although the actual number to be appointed will be for the Chief Commissioner to determine, taking account of the Commission's capacity to manage a greatly increased complement and also subject to the availability of suitable people from within a limited and specialised market. Arrangements are already under way to deliver a competition for commissioners.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Ministerial Meetings

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of meetings she has held with MLAs since May 2007.

(AQW 3829/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): I have met MLAs on 12 occasions in my capacity as Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development since May 2007.

Northern Ireland Produce

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the levels of investment in relation to the marketing and advertising of Northern Ireland produce in (i) Northern Ireland; (ii) Great Britain; and (iii) Europe.

(AQW 3873/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department is proactive in assisting the industry where it can. However, European Commission State Aid rules place severe constraints on the use of Government funds for the advertising of local agri-food products both here and across the EC.

In relation to the marketing of local produce, my Department administers the Regional Food Programme. This is designed to promote quality local produce, to develop profitable and sustainable markets here, in the South and in Britain and to increase co-operation and communication between all sectors of the agri-food industry.

Under the first phase of the programme, over £300,000 was awarded to representative groups. Activities included the new Food Pavilion at the Balmoral Show, the Loughshore Food Festival and a cross-sectoral recipe book which promoted the use of fresh local ingredients.

DARD provided marketing support to local agri-food companies under the EU Marketing of Quality Agricultural Products Grant Scheme. During the period 2000 to 2006 DARD awarded funding of £1.25m under this Scheme to enable companies to increase their marketing capability and develop new markets for quality local produce.

The Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) are responsible for the promotion of red meat and red meat products in domestic and international markets. Its current marketing budget is approximately £1.5 million. The LMC, in association with InvestNI, participates in

trade missions to international food fairs such as SIAL in France and ANUGA in Germany.

Subsidy Payments

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to enable farmers to receive their European Commission subsidy payments via the BACS service.

(AQW 3911/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: From 16 October 2008 EC requirements oblige DARD to make all subsidy payments by Bankers Automated Clearing System (BACS). To help ensure a smooth transition it is intended that from 1 May 2008, no subsidy payment will be issued unless bank details have been provided by the farm business. On 11 February 2008 my Department wrote to the 20% of farm businesses who had not signed up for BACS requesting them to provide bank account details as soon as possible, and in advance of the Less Favoured Area (LFA) payments due to issue in March.

Written Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of written questions received since May 2007, and the average length of time taken to publish a response.

(AQW 3976/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: From May 2007 to January 31 2008 my office has received and answered 247 written assembly questions. The average length of time taken to publish a response has been 8 working days.

Development of Forests

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the discussions she has had with Waterways Ireland on the future development of forests adjacent to rivers zoned for boating and other leisure/tourist-related development.

(AQW 3984/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I wish to advise that to date, I have not been engaged in any discussions with Waterways Ireland on the future development of forests adjacent to rivers zoned for boating and other leisure/tourist – related development.

I am aware however, that my officials in Rivers Agency continue to liaise with Waterways Ireland on matters around transfer arrangements of facilities on

my Department's land. The Forestry Strategy recognises the potential for forests to provide a wider range of tourist-related activities and I can confirm that Forest Service will be happy to consider projects that these forests can accommodate.

Communication Access

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development 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 3993/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department recognises that some of our customers and staff may be either deaf or hard of hearing. In light of this we have instigated a number of physical changes to some Departmental buildings. Induction loops have been installed in key premises, such as college conference and training rooms which are used by customers, students and staff. Portable loop systems are also provided in some buildings. The international ear-T symbol is used in buildings indicating where a hearing loop is available.

Information boards and signage giving details of the main attractions are sited at Forest Parks and Recreation Areas. Computerised information kiosks are sited at Tollymore, Glenariff and Florencecourt Forest Parks.

Deaf Awareness training was provided to approximately 70 front-line staff during 2006/07. The aim of this training was to create an awareness and understanding of the communication needs and different methods of communication used by Deaf and Hard of Hearing people and also to enable participants to become aware of the need to acquire a basic ability to communicate with Deaf and Hard of Hearing people.

The Department has a Textphone installed to enable more effective communication between the Department and those with hearing difficulties. The Department's Corporate Departmental notepaper also advises of textphone contact numbers for those who have a hearing difficulty.

Easy read versions of publications have also previously been suggested as helping people who are deaf or hard of hearing. The Department, as a matter of good practice actively encourages policy officials to produce easy-read versions of publications which use plain language and includes straightforward instructions for customers to follow.

Assistance for Fishermen

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her strategy to assist fishermen in 2008. (AQW 3998/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am fully aware that the industry has faced difficult times recently due to lower prices for fish and higher operating costs. I want to see a fishing industry here that is both profitable and sustainable. Fishing opportunities are clearly an important factor in this and in the year ahead I will want to improve our scientific knowledge of fish stocks in the Irish Sea to ensure that fisheries management decisions are well informed and that our fishermen are able to benefit from fish quotas that are consistent with ensuring the long-term sustainability of these fisheries.

During 2008 I will continue to articulate the needs of our industry in meetings with my Ministerial counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales. I also intend to explore areas of mutual co-operation with Mary Coughlan TD, the Minister responsible for fisheries in the South. In April I will be meeting with Commissioner Borg to discuss with him the difficulties faced by our fishing fleet.

This year my Department will bring forward a draft Strategy for the Inshore Fisheries and legislative measures to improve conservation for species such as crabs and lobster and scallops. These proposals are and will be developed in close consultation with the industry and other marine stakeholders.

As you will be aware, I announced recently that the fishing industry would shortly benefit for some £25m of investment from the European Fisheries Fund. The EFF will be open to applications later in the year whenever the European Commission has approved the Operational Programme which is being developed jointly with fisheries administrations in England, Scotland and Wales.

Fishing Fleet

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) what strategy she has adopted in relation to understanding the fundamental problems faced by the Northern Ireland fishing fleet; (ii) what steps she intends to take in order to involve local fishermen in policy development; and (iii) what priority she is giving to assisting the industry, ahead of enforcing legislation. (AQW 3999/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: During my time as Minister I have met with fishermen and their representatives on a number of occasions. For example, last December I visited Kilkeel, Ardglass and Portavogie and had the

opportunity to listen to fishermen and their representatives prior to the Fisheries Council in Brussels. Earlier this month I had a meeting with a delegation from the NI Trawlmen's Trading Co. The industry has made me aware of the key issues and challenges it faces and I will be articulating these on their behalf when I meet with Commissioner Borg in April.

Fishermen are already involved in shaping policies. At the moment my Department is working with fishermen to bring forward a management plan for the Strangford Lough pot fishery. Fishermen have also suggested a package of conservation measures that can be deployed in the scallop fishery and my Department is drafting policy and legislation proposals to bring those into effect.

The Irish Sea Data Enhancement Pilot Project is an important area of collaboration between policy makers, scientists and fishermen. It will help provide data through about the extent and reasons for discarding and identify ways to minimise these. I welcome the involvement of fishermen in these projects and policy developments because of the insight they bring to those issues. I want to see more joint working so that we can together help develop a stronger, more sustainable fishing industry.

The fishing industry as with other industries must operate within a regulatory framework. In the case of fishing, much of this originates from the Common Fisheries Policy and the complex rules and regulations that have been established to control the exploitation of fish in European waters and control effort on vulnerable fish stocks. It is vital that the fishing industry comply with these rules to ensure its long-term sustainability. This year the Commission will be finalising its review of the Cod Recovery Plan and will introduce new measures to help build cod stocks. I will want to see that any new management regime for the Irish Sea is appropriate and that it takes full account of the fishing patterns of our fleet and the relatively low impact that the prawn fleet makes on cod mortality. I will be using my forthcoming meeting with Commissioner Borg to press home this point.

Fisheries Legislation

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the annual cost of enforcing fisheries legislation in relation to the Northern Ireland fishing fleet, broken down by costs for (i) the Ken Vickers; (ii) Royal Navy vessels; (iii) Royal Air Force (RAF) Nimrods; (iv) the RAF aircraft; (v) United Kingdom fisheries protection vessels; (vi) Isle of Man fisheries protection vessels; and (vii) her department's officials. (AQW 4016/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The annual cost of enforcing fisheries

regulations in relation to the North's fleet is broken down as follows:

- Ken Vickers: £38,806
- Royal Navy vessels: £294,525
- Royal Air Force Nimrods: £ nil
- The RAF aircraft: £ nil
- UK fisheries Protection Vessels: £ nil
- Isle of Man fisheries Protection Vessel: £55782
- My Department's officials £743,294

It should be noted that only the costs for the Ken Vickers and this Department's officials come directly from the North's block. In addition the Isle of Man authorities are not able to distinguish costs attributable to the North's vessels.

Meeting Requests

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of meeting requests she has received since May 2007.

(AQW 4027/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Since May 2007 I have received 432 formal requests for meetings. These include requests from MLA's and other organisations.

Irish Sea Cod Fishery

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the amount of money that was allocated to the tie-up scheme for the Northern Ireland fishing fleet, during the closure of the Irish Sea Cod Fishery in 2004.

(AQW 4060/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Payments totalling £1.23m were made to vessel owners who participated in the 2004 Transitional Aid scheme.

Fisheries Scientist

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the current average annual salary of a fisheries scientist in her department.

(AQW 4061/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Scientists who specialise in fisheries research are employed by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) which is a Non Departmental Public Body sponsored by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The current average annual salary

of the AFBI scientists engaged in fisheries research is £28,710.

Tuberculosis Reactor

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the minimum; (ii) the maximum; and (iii) the average, time-scale for (a) the removal of tuberculosis reactor animals off-farm, following a positive test; and (b) the results of tests performed on tuberculosis reactor animals, following animal presentation at abattoir and post-mortem.

(AQW 4069/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

- The average time for the removal of a tuberculosis reactor animal off-farm during the period 1/1/2007 to 30/11/2007 was 12.4 working days. The minimum and maximum times were 2.7 and 94.5 working days respectively.
- The average time for histopathology results following presentation at abattoir, during the period 1/1/2007 to 30/11/2007, was 16 working days. The minimum and maximum times were 7 and 41 working days respectively.

The average time for bacteriological results following presentation at abattoir was 52 working days. The minimum and maximum times were 24 and 114 working days respectively.

The information provided is based on the most recent results from the period 1/1/2007 to 30/11/2007, which allows the information on bacteriology to be considered in full. The bacteriology tests take approximately two months.

Farm Nutrient Management Scheme

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of (i) pre-enquiry; and (ii) full, applications submitted for the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme. (AQW 4070/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The numbers of applications received, for the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme, were as follows:

- (i) 11,473 preliminary applications.
- (ii) 4891 full applications.

Farm Nutrient Management Scheme

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of claims that

have been submitted for completed Farm Nutrient Management Scheme projects. (AQW 4071/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: 1,134 claims for payment under the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme were received by 18th February.

Single Farm Payment Scheme

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of farmers who (i) are in receipt of a Single Farm Payment; (ii) received their Single Farm Payment on time; and (iii) are still awaiting receipt of their Single Farm Payment; and to further detail the reasons for the delay.

(AQW 4114/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: (i) A total of 39,039 applications were submitted under the 2007 Single Farm Payment (SFP) Scheme.

(ii) Payments have been processed for receipt by the end of February 2008 in 35,521 (90.9%) cases. At 21 February 2008, a further 159 applications had been assessed as being ineligible, bringing the total number of finalised claims to 35,680 (91.3%). These figures are ahead of the published schedule.

(iii) The 3,359 remaining cases either have queries which require correction as a result of, for example on-farm inspections or because of set aside conditions not being met, or cannot be paid as the farmer's estate is in probate. A payment will not be due in some of the remaining cases because of ineligibility or the application of penalties under scheme rules. It is anticipated that at least 96.15% of the annual budget will be paid out by the end of June 2008 in accordance with European Union legislation.

Farm Nutrient Management Scheme

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of pre-work inspections for Farm Nutrient Management Scheme projects that have been carried out and have had no claim submitted. (AQW 4241/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Since the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme (FNMS) opened on 26 January 2005, some 4000 pre-approval inspections have been carried out. At 25th February, approvals had been issued in 3088 such cases and, of these, 1,945 applicants have still to complete their work or/and submit their claims for payment.

MSc Communication Students

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of MSc Communication students at Loughry College who have gained employment in the area of agriculture or the agri-food industry in the last five years.

(AQW 4283/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Over the last 5 years, from 2003 to 2007, a total of 56 students have completed the MSc in Communications. (38 of these studied on a full-time basis and 18 studied on a part-time basis).

22 of these students either were employed or have gained employment in the area of agriculture or the agri-food industry.

A further 10 graduates either were employed or have gained employment in rural businesses / voluntary.

The employment status of 2 students is unknown.

European Union

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of (i) the implications of the Treaty of Lisbon in relation to the remit of her department; (ii) the latest proposals drawn up by the leaders of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Agricultural Negotiating Committee; and (iii) the likely outcomes for Northern Ireland farming if the European Union Commissioner supports the WTO proposals.

(AQW 4299/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: (i): Within the remit of my Department, the main impact of the treaty of Lisbon, if ratified, is the extension of the 'co-decision procedure' to cover Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) legislation and most Common Fisheries Policy legislation. This will mean that from 2009, the European Parliament as well as the EU Council of Ministers will need to approve changes to the CAP, compared with the present situation where the Parliament is required only to provide an opinion. This will give MEP's a much greater say in the decision-making process on the future of the CAP from 2009 onwards, although the co-decision procedure may mean that changes will take longer to be agreed. Similarly MEPs will have a greater involvement in the process of making CFP legislation.

(ii): On 8 February 2008, the chair of the WTO agricultural negotiations, Crawford Falconer, published a revised draft modalities paper setting out a range of proposals covering domestic support, market access and export competition. There will need to be a significant amount of further negotiation before the gaps between the main negotiators can be narrowed

and a final agreement reached. The proposed range of reductions in import tariffs, which may be countered to some extent by making use of the proposed options for nominating key product lines as "sensitive products", are likely to have the greatest impact within the EU. However, we need to know the details of any final agreement before a full assessment of the impacts can be made.

(iii): To obtain a WTO agreement, the proposals not only need to be supported by the European Trade Commissioner, but also by the EU Council of Ministers and other members of the WTO. In advance of a final agreement, it is not possible to project with any confidence what the possible impacts of a eventual WTO deal might be on agriculture in the North. However, my Department has an on-going research project which has looked at the possible impact of earlier WTO proposals. From this, we know that the magnitude of tariff cuts and the use of sensitive products status will be key issues in determining the effects of a WTO deal on the local industry. However, these issues remain under negotiation and it remains unclear if a WTO agreement will be reached in the near future and precisely what it might comprise.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Waste Produced

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the percentage of waste produced by the department that is recycled.

(AQW 3948/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poole): The Waste Management Strategy for Northern Ireland required Government Departments to have Departmental Waste Management Plans in place. This Department's plan was published in 2005 and is updated annually.

Within DCAL significant streams of waste paper, toner cartridges, cardboard, aluminium cans, plastic bottles, furniture and light bulbs are recycled. The data is not available to provide the actual percentage of DCAL's waste that is recycled.

Written Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of written questions received since May 2007, and the average length of time taken to publish a response. (AQW 3977/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Three hundred and thirty eight written questions have been received since May 2007 and the average length of time taken to respond was 8.6 days.

Communication Access

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure 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 3991/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Within the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Induction Loop systems are available at the Department's premises for use as required by the deaf and hard of hearing. This is an electronic device which is used in conjunction with a hearing aid. At entrances to Departmental premises, signs are displayed to inform hard of hearing and deaf people that an induction loop system is available. Also within the Department's Headquarters at Interpoint a Deaf Alerter is available to any deaf or hard of hearing visitor. This vibrates should the Fire Alarm activate. In addition, a number of staff within DCAL have received training in basic sign language skills.

Bangor Library

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail how much funding has been allocated for the completion of the new Bangor library. (AQW 3996/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The current allocation of capital grant for the completion of the new Bangor Library is £2.221m. This includes construction costs and professional fees but excludes non capital grant monies for items such as book stock, furniture and fittings.

Meeting Requests

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of meeting requests he has received since May 2007. (AQW 4026/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have received a total of 203 meeting requests, 36 of which were from MLAs.

Funding Applications

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of (i) successful; and (ii) unsuccessful, funding applications submitted by (a) music groups; (b) music organisations; and (c) members of the Bands' Association, since May 2007. (AQW 4085/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The information requested is shown in the table below:

Funding organisation		No. successful	No. unsuccessful
Arts Council of Northern Ireland	Music groups	10	0
	Music organisations	10	3
	Members of the bands Association	40*	15*
Ulster-Scots Agency	Music groups	2	0
	Music organisations	3	1
	Members of the bands Association	35*	13*

*These figures are the numbers of bands, rather than members of the Bands' Association. The Arts Council and the Ulster-Scots Agency do not hold information to confirm whether the bands are members of the Bands' Association.

Irish Rugby Football Union

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3535/08, to confirm that all documentation relating to the potential funding of the Irish Rugby Football Union by his department, to be placed in the Assembly Library, will include documentation held by Sport NI. (AQW 4136/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the documentation that it holds and for its placement in the Assembly Library. In light of your question, however, I am happy to bring this matter to the attention of the Chief Executive of SNI for his consideration.

Recruitment

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3563/08, to detail (i) the geographic area that these posts cover; (ii) the recruitment process used to fill these posts;

and (iii) how the equality of the appointments was monitored. (AQW 4137/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I apologise for the delay in replying to the Member.

Pursuant to my answer to AQW 3563/08, the geographic area covered by those Ulster Branch, Irish Rugby Football Union (UB-IRFU) posts in receipt of Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) funding is as follows:

Post	Period	Geographic scope of posts
Domestic Rugby Development Manager	1.4.03 – 31.8.06	UB-IRFU province of Ulster.
Club/Volunteer Development Manager	1.4.03 – 31.3.06 1.9.06 – 31.3.09	UB-IRFU province of Ulster
Referees Development Manager	1.4.05 – 31.3.08	UB-IRFU province of Ulster
Registration Manager	1.4.05 – 31.3.08	UB-IRFU province of Ulster
All other posts	1.4.05 – 31.3.08	Northern Ireland only

All recruitment processes followed UB-IRFU recruitment procedures. SNI undertakes management audits of UB-IRFU which includes its equity policy and staff appointment processes.

Ulster Museum Building

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the location, within the redeveloped Ulster Museum building, that will be used to display and interpret the machinery associated with the linen and engineering industries. (AQW 4138/08)

Ulster Museum Building

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the action he has taken to ensure that artefacts associated with (i) the aero-space industry; and (ii) maritime history, are protected, preserved and retained in a dedicated museum; and to make a statement. (AQW 4139/08)

Ulster Museum Building

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what his assessment is of the tourist potential of bringing together a critical mass of maritime material and artefacts, including vessels, that would form the nucleus of a museum dedicated to preserving and interpreting the nautical heritage of

Northern Ireland, at a suitable location in Belfast. (AQW 4140/08)

Ulster Museum Building

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to take forward a report produced by the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, published on the 23 May 2002, which highlighted the tourist potential of a museum, bringing together the maritime history, aeronautical history and technological achievements of the previous centuries; and to make a statement. (AQW 4142/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I will answer these four questions together.

The displays in the re-designed Belfast Gallery will use the rich photographic collections of National Museums Northern Ireland to convey a strong sense of the lives and working conditions of the many thousands of men and women who were employed in the linen, engineering and other industries (for example the ropeworks and tobacco industries) which underpinned the city's industrial and commercial achievements. Allied to this the National Museums Northern Ireland (Ulster Folk and Transport Museum) is already responsible for the protection, preservation and retention of artefacts associated with both the aerospace industry and maritime history and holds considerable and significant collections in both areas. These include:

- Artefact Collections ranging from individual objects and paintings to full-sized craft;
- Technical Plans Collections, including, in the case of maritime history, the Harland & Wolff Ship Plans Collection, the most comprehensive of its kind in the world, and
- Photographic Archives, including shipbuilding images and wartime
- aircraft production

I readily accept that Museums make a key contribution to the achievement of Government priorities and goals, including tourism. The success of the Titanic - Built in Belfast exhibition at Union Station in Washington DC in June 2007 suggests there may be tourism potential associated with maritime material and artefacts, including vessels. It is worth remembering, however, that the viability and sustainability of such a dedicated museum are of paramount importance.

With regard to the above issues a display tower aimed at showcasing the quality and scope of the national collections, will be prominently and permanently positioned on the ground floor of the redeveloped Ulster Museum and will be the focal point for the display and interpretation of a number of iconic objects

including a 19th century reeling machine used in the linen production process.

Finally, in your final question you refer to a report produced by the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee in 2002 in which the Committee outlined their support for a maritime and industrial museum in Titanic Quarter. I can report that discussions have taken place with National Museums on the possibility of revisiting their proposals for the interpretation of Belfast's maritime and industrial heritage, this to be taken forward within the context of the current plans for the regeneration of the Titanic Quarter. Officials will draw on the Committee's report "Cultural Tourism and the Arts" as appropriate.

Language Funding

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the funding for (i) Irish language; and (ii) Ulster-Scots, projects over the next 3 years.

(AQW 4180/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I would refer the member to AQO 1661/08 which was answered on 8 February 2008 and fully answers this question.

Funding to Féile an Phobail

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his plans to provide funding to Féile an Phobail over the next 3 years.

(AQW 4183/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Community Festivals Fund is being devolved to the local councils with effect from 1 April 2008 and decisions on grants to specific festivals will be their responsibility.

At this point in time I have no plans to provide any direct funding to Community Festivals.

Public Records Office

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline whether the proposed location of the Public Records Office is consistent with the British Standard BS5454:2000, particularly in relation to humidity and moisture.

(AQW 4228/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I can confirm that the proposed location of the Public Record Office is consistent with the British Standard BS5454:2000 and the building will meet BS5454:2000 in relation to humidity and moisture.

Public Records Office

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (i) the number of people working at staff officer level and above in the Public Records Office who are in post as a result of acting up from a lower grade and who did not undergo a competitive interview process; (ii) the number of people working at staff officer level and above who were formally interviewed in an open competitive process; and (iii) the process for career advancement through the various grades in the Public Records Office.

(AQW 4239/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

(i) As of 27 February, the Department has eight people working at staff officer level and above in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) who are in post as a result of acting up from a lower grade.

(ii) At the 27 February, the Department has 14 people at staff officer level and above in PRONI, who have been formally interviewed in an open competitive process;

(iii) There are staff employed in a number of disciplines within PRONI and, with the exception of curatorial staff, career advancement is by NICS promotion and trawl competitions. On occasion, posts may be advertised externally. Career advancement for curatorial staff is also by NICS promotion and trawl competitions, however at recruitment stage and again at promotion to curatorial grade D, straight through grading arrangements apply. When straight through grading arrangements apply, the criteria to be satisfied for promotion is fitness to perform the duties of the higher grade and the availability of work at the higher level.

Ulster-Scots Education

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his policy for funding Ulster-Scots education summer schools.

(AQW 4266/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department has no specific policy in relation to funding Ulster-Scots education summer schools.

The funding for Ulster-Scots summer schools is managed by the Ulster-Scots Agency on receipt of applications from Ulster-Scots groups within the community.

Ulster-Scots Education

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of funding available for Ulster-Scots education summer schools.
(AQW 4267/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I refer to your previous question (AQW 4266/08) in which you ask about my policy on the funding of Ulster-Scots education summer schools.

My Department does not fund Ulster-Scots summer schools. The funding is managed by the Ulster-Scots Agency on receipt of applications from Ulster-Scots groups within the community.

The Ulster-Scots Agency has “set aside” £200,000 for the project in 2008 and the closing date for applications is 17th March 2008.

Written Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of written questions he has answered in each month since May 2007.
(AQW 4268/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since May 2007 the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has received 338 written questions for answer and the breakdown per month is as follows:

Month/Year	Number of questions
May 2007	2
June 2007	63
July 2007	56
August 2007	0 (due to recess)
September 2007	18
October 2007	41
November 2007	36
December 2007	57
January 2008	21
February 2008*	44

* up to 13th February 2008

Public Records Office

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the process and findings of the equality impact assessment preceding or subsequent to the announcement in relation to the relocation of the Public Records Office; and to outline any proposed

mitigating actions in response to these findings.
(AQW 4281/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The policy to relocate the Public Record Office and the location of the new Record Office were both the subject of equality screening exercises.

As there was not found to be any equality implications with the policy or location, a full equality impact assessment was not required. There are therefore no mitigating actions.

Irish-Language Events

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4045/08, to detail the reasons why he has been unable to attend an Irish language event since taking up office.
(AQW 4300/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: While I would, diary permitting, be happy to attend events of a cultural nature, I am not a speaker of the Irish language and could not contribute in any meaningful way to an event conducted in Irish.

International Olympic Commission

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline what plans he has to liaise with the International Olympic Commission in order to encourage the incorporation of Gaelic games as part of the Olympics.
(AQW 4426/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) is the governing body of Gaelic games and is responsible for their development and promotion. Any plans to liaise with the International Olympic Commission in order to encourage the incorporation of Gaelic games as part of the Olympics would therefore be a matter for the GAA.

EDUCATION

Keeping Parents Informed

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQO 444/08, to outline how she expects (i) school principals; and (ii) boards of governors, to work with parents on requests regarding their children's education.
(AQW 1071/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): The Department recognises that there are real benefits

when schools engage openly with parents and actively encourage them to have a say in how their children are educated. It also recognises that the means by which schools and parents should relate to each other are most effective when they are developed at local level by schools themselves, in consultation with parents and does not therefore prescribe any particular approach.

The new School Improvement Policy which issued for consultation on 21 January highlights the importance of constructive and regular communication between parents, pupils and schools and seeks views on proposals to harness more effectively the opportunities that extended schools provide for such communication and to provide additional resource material to help schools in developing and maintaining their links with parents.

Ghríosóinn gach páirtí leasmhar le páirt a ghlacadh sa chomhairliúchán seo agus a dtuairimí orthu seo agus ar mholtaí eile atá leagtha amach i Scoil Mhaith Gach Scoil a chur in iúl dúinn.

I would encourage all interested parties to take part in this consultation and to let us have their views on these and other proposals set out in Scoil Mhaith Gach Scoil a chur in iúl dúinn Every School a Good School.

Academic Selection

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail whether or not the principle of academic selection is safeguarded in legislation; and if she will bring forward proposals for the replacement of the transfer test that uphold this principle. (AQW 1772/08)

The Minister of Education: The principle of academic selection is not safeguarded in legislation. What the legislation does is make the commencement of the abolition of academic admissions criteria subject to an Assembly vote and it makes the introduction of new admissions criteria regulations contingent on resolution of the future of academic selection. Without this resolution and without these regulations there will simply be an absence of law and an unregulated system. A lapse into un-regulation would not, I believe, safeguard academic selection as independent and unregulated academic selection is a prospect fraught with administrative and litigious perils.

Sin an fáth ar chuir mé béim ar leith ariamh ar an riachtanas le comhaontú, nó creidim gur sin atá de dhíth orainn. Tá rún agam moltaí a chur chun tosaigh leis an suíomh seo a léiriú.

This is why I have always been clear on the need for consensus as I believe that is what the position requires of us. It is my intention to bring forward proposals reflecting this position.

Newbuild Programme for Schools

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education to provide a timescale for the new build programme for schools in the Upper Bann constituency; and to detail any delays that have occurred, and the reason for these delays. (AQW 3215/08)

The Minister of Education: There are eight schools approved for new buildings in Upper Bann. Construction of Waringstown P.S. has already started on site. Planning is underway for the other schools. Planning of St Teresa's P.S. and Tannaghmore P.S. has not progressed as quickly as anticipated due to the need for revisions to the designs previously submitted to the Department.

In the case of Banbridge Academy pre-tender costs have only recently been submitted to the Department for consideration. Revised Economic Appraisals for Lurgan College and Portadown College were required as a result of changes affecting the respective sites and this work has impacted on the planned timescales. These appraisals have recently been submitted by the Southern Education and Library Board to the Department for consideration. In the case of St Mary's P.S., Banbridge planning remains on target and for St Patrick's College planning has progressed more quickly than previously estimated.

Sa tábla thíos léirítear an chéim atá bainte amach ag na scoileanna faoi láthair. Tabharfar na scéimeanna ar aghaidh leis an údarás ábhartha oideachais agus beidh na hamscálaí chuige seo faoi réir na próisis riachtanacha pleanála agus tógála a bheith críochnaithe go sásúil agus infhaighteacht acmhainní in aon bhliain ar leith.

The table below shows the current stage which the schools have reached. The schemes will be progressed with the relevant education authority and the timescales for doing so will be subject to the necessary planning and building processes being completed satisfactorily and the availability of resources in any particular year.

School	Current stage of project
St Teresa's P.S., Lurgan	Revised Stage D submission under consideration (final design drawings and costs)
Tannaghmore P.S., Lurgan	Revised Stage D submission received and under consideration
St Mary's P.S., Banbridge	Stage C submission approved Jan 08. Stage D submission awaited.
St Patrick's College, Banbridge	Stage C submission approved Dec 07. Stage D submission awaited.
Waringstown P.S.	Construction work started August 2007.

School	Current stage of project
Banbridge Academy	Pre-tender costs received and under consideration
Lurgan College	Revised Economic Appraisal currently being considered
Portadown College	Revised Economic Appraisal currently being considered

Newbuild Programme for Schools

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not her proposals for post-primary transfer will have an impact on the New Build Programme for schools. (AQW 3263/08)

The Minister of Education: Is éadóigh feidhm a bheith ag mo phleananna le hathstruchtú mór diomaite den mhéid atá riachtanach cheana féin ag an fheidhm le scoileanna inbhuanaithe. Sna deich mbliana seo romhainn, de thairbhe ár n-easpaí cóiríochta faoi láthair, beidh fiacha orainn méid mór den eastát iar-bhunscoile a atógáil, is cuma cad é a tharlóidh.

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.

Teachers with Criminal Convictions

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teachers in Northern Ireland with criminal convictions. (AQW 3392/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá sé curtha in iúl ag Príomhfheidhmeannaigh na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne go bhfuil cúigear múinteoir i dTuaisceart na hÉireann a ciontaíodh, a bhfuil beirt acu fostaithe faoi láthair.

The Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards have advised that there are five teachers in the North of Ireland with convictions of which two are currently in employment.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 2920/08, to detail (i) the date of the meeting (ii) who she met with; and (iii) the subjects that were discussed. (AQW 3459/08)

The Minister of Education: Chuaigh mé go Dún Éideann 12 Nollaig, áit ar bhuail mé le Fíona Hyslop,

Aire Oideachais na hAlban. Phléigh muid na ceisteanna a leanas:

I travelled to Edinburgh on 12 December and met with Fiona Hyslop, the Education Minister for Scotland. We discussed the following issues –

- OECD Peer Review;
- Family Resilience/Disadvantage;
- Teacher Recruitment and Induction including funding for this;
- Gaelic Medium Education; and
- Parental Involvement in Education.

Preschool Provision

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education what is her assessment of the need for increased preschool provision at St Brigid's school, Glassdrummond; and what plans her department has to deal with the increased number of applications for enrolment at the school. (AQW 3518/08)

The Minister of Education: Of the 20 pupils admitted to Year 1 at St Brigid's Primary School for the 2007/08 school year, 10 were reception aged children.

Schools may only admit reception age pupils where there are places left after the school has admitted all those of compulsory school age applying for places from within their approved admissions number. Therefore the school has not turned down any application from children of compulsory school age.

The school authorities have not made an application to my Department for the provision of a nursery unit at the school but I understand that the level of provision in the immediate area is considered to be sufficient to meet current demand.

With regard to the overall enrolment at St Brigid's, it is a matter for the school authorities to consider whether they wish to make a request for a temporary variation to the school's intake or enrolment number.

Bhreithneodh mo Roinn aon iarratas den chineál sin, i gcomhairle le Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Deiscirt agus Comhairle na Scoileanna Caitliceacha faoi Chothabháil.

My Department would consider any such application in consultation with the Southern Education and Library Board and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.

Language at Schools

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to give a timescale within which she intends to introduce (i) GCSE; (ii) 'AS' level; and (iii) 'A' level courses in

Hindi, Mandarin and Russian into schools in Northern Ireland. (AQW 3581/08)

The Minister of Education: Responsibility for the delivery of specific courses at GCSE and A level rests with individual schools, in the context of the requirements of the revised curriculum. At Key Stage 4, schools are required to offer pupils access to at least one language course in an official EU language and many offer a wider range than that. Both Russian and Mandarin are available at GCSE and A level and may be offered by schools here.

Ní thairgeann na forais cháiliúcháin cúrsaí GCSE agus A-leibhéil i Hiondúch, ach tá cáilíochtaí eile ar fáil i gcomhthéacs an chreat cáilíochtaí atá ann idir Sasain, Alba agus Tuaisceart na hÉireann. Is féidir le scoileanna, mar sin de, na cáilíochtaí seo a bhreithniú.

Awarding bodies do not offer GCSE and A level courses in Hindi, but other qualifications are available within the context of the qualifications framework which is in place between England, Scotland and the North of Ireland and are therefore open to all schools to consider.

Modern Languages Provision

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail which modern languages will be provided at primary school level under the provisions of the new Northern Ireland curriculum. (AQW 3582/08)

The Minister of Education: I believe an early start to language learning is of benefit to our young people. Although languages are not compulsory at primary level, the revised curriculum gives primary schools greater flexibility to introduce a modern language of their choice.

Additionally, through my Primary Languages programme, support will be available to primary schools who want to introduce Spanish or Irish.

Tá mé ag fanacht fosta le moltaí do straitéis fhoriomlán teangacha don Tuaisceart ón chomhlánad Ábhair do Theangacha, Theangeolaíocht agus Staidéir Cheantair idir Ollscoil Uladh agus Ollscoil na Banríona, Béal Feirste. Cuimseoidh seo foghlaim teanga ag bunleibhéal.

I am also waiting for recommendations to inform an overall languages strategy for the North from the joint University of Ulster-Queen's University Belfast Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies. This will include language learning at primary level.

Modern Languages Provision

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the steps she is taking to provide the relevant training to primary school teachers (i) in post; (ii) in training; and (iii) on the substitute teachers' register, in those modern languages that will be introduced as part of the new Northern Ireland curriculum.

(AQW 3662/08)

The Minister of Education: The revised curriculum gives primary schools greater flexibility to introduce a modern language of their choice but languages are not compulsory at primary level. As training must meet statutory requirements in the first instance, languages are not currently part of the specific curriculum training for primary teachers.

However, steps are being taken in this area. Stranmillis University College is offering two optional modules in languages for BEd (primary) students. In addition, I will, in the coming months, be receiving recommendations on a languages strategy for the North, which will include language learning at primary level and the associated training.

Sa scoilbhliain seo, tá mé ag cur Chlár Teangacha i mBunscoileanna in áit le tacaíocht a chur ar fáil do scoileanna ar maith leo Spáinnis nó Gaeilge a thabhairt isteach. Is príomhghné de mo chlár rannpháirtíocht an mhúinteoir ranga agus an fhorbairt ghairmiúil a bhaineann léi.

In this school year, I am putting in place a Primary Languages Programme to provide support for schools who wish to introduce Spanish or Irish. A key element of my programme is class teacher participation and associated professional development.

School Development Proposals

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of school development proposals in relation to (i) the closure of a school; (ii) the amalgamation of two or more schools; (iii) a change to integrated status; and (iv) any other development proposals, that have been submitted to her department (a) in each of the last 5 years; and (b) since May 2007.

(AQW 3680/08)

The Minister of Education: The table below summarises the number of school Development Proposals submitted to the Department in each of the last five years and since May 2007 dealing with

- the closure of a school
- the amalgamation and merger of two or more schools
- a change to integrated status
- all other Development Proposals

Liostaíodh Moltaí Forbartha sa bhliain inar foilsíodh iad.

Please note that Development Proposals have been listed in the year in which they were published.

DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT

	(i) the closure of a school	(ii) the merger or amalgamation of two or more schools	(iii) a change to integrated status	(iv) all other Development Proposals	Total by year
2003	5	9	2	29	45
2004	4	3	0	12	19
2005	12	3	1	18	34
2006	18	4	6	17	45
2007	7	3	3	25	38
Total by type	46	22	12	101	181
Since May 2007	4	0	2	14	20

Of the proposals detailed as submitted to the Department, decisions on fifteen Development Proposals are pending.

Irish-Medium Schools

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of applications for the establishment of Irish Medium schools that (i) have been approved; (ii) have been rejected; and (iii) are still pending a decision, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3683/08)

The Minister of Education: Sna táblaí thíos, leagtar amach na Moltaí Forbartha a ceadaíodh, a diúltaíodh agus atá ar feitheamh go fóill d'earnáil an Ghaeloideachais i ngach ceann de na cúig bliana seo caite. Tá moltaí do bhunú Gaelscoileanna le deontas i gcabhair, aonaid Ghaeloideachais agus Gaelnaíonraí san áireamh.

The tables below set out the Development Proposal applications that have been approved, rejected and that are still pending for the Irish Medium sector in each of the last five years. Proposals for the establishment of grant-aided Irish medium schools, Irish medium units and Irish medium nurseries are included.

2003 PROPOSALS APPROVED

ELB area	School	Date Published	Description of Proposal
WELB	St Colmcille's Primary School Carrickmore.	13/03/03	Establishment of an Irish-medium unit at St Colmcille's Primary School, Carrickmore.
SELB	St Mary's Primary School, Pomeroy	27/03/03	Establishment of a unit at St Mary's Primary School, Pomeroy for the education of children of primary school age through the medium of Irish.
SELB	St Patrick's Primary School, Crossmaglen	19/05/03	Establishment of a Unit at St Patrick's PS, Crossmaglen for the education of children of primary school age through the medium of Irish.
NEELB	Bunscoil an Chaistil	26/05/03	Proposal that Bunscoil an Chaistil, an Irish Language Medium Primary School in Ballycastle, Co. Antrim, should be given grant-aided status.
BELB	Gaelscoil an Damba	05/06/03	Proposal that a new Gaelscoil will open in September 2003.

PROPOSALS WITHDRAWN

ELB area	School	Date Published	Description of Proposal
BELB	Bunscoil an tSléibhe Dhuibh	22/05/03	Establishment, within the school, of a twenty-six unit nursery offering full-time provision.

2004 PROPOSALS APPROVED

ELB area	School	Date Published	Description of Proposal
BELB	Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain	20/11/03 Republished on 08/01/04	Recognise this school as a controlled Irish-medium primary school.
BELB	Gaelscoil na Mona, Turf Lodge	20/05/04	Establishment of a new Irish Medium Primary School in the Turf Lodge area.
WELB	Gaelscoil An Traonaigh, Lisnaskea	09/06/04	Establishment of a new Irish Medium Primary School in Lisnaskea.

ELB area	School	Date Published	Description of Proposal
NEELB	Gaelscoil na Speiríní, Draperstown	17/06/04	Establishment of a new Irish Medium Primary School in Draperstown.

PROPOSALS REJECTED

ELB area	School	Date Published	Description of Proposal
BELB	Gaelscoil an Lonnáin	22/04/04	That the school should be recognised as a grant-aided Irish-medium primary school.
BELB	Bunscoil Thaoilinn, Poleglass	11/05/04	Establishment of a new Irish Medium primary school in the Poleglass area.

2005**PROPOSALS APPROVED**

ELB area	School	Date Published	Description of Proposal
NEELB	Gaelscoil Ghleann Darach	14/02/05	Establishment of Grant-Aided Irish-Medium Primary School in Crumlin.
BELB	Gaelscoil an Lonnáin	17/02/05	Establishment of a new grant-aided, Irish-medium primary school at Falls Road.
WELB	Gaelscoil na gCrann	31/03/05	Establishment of a new grant-aided, Irish-medium primary school in Omagh.

School Development Proposals

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of school development proposals dealing with (i) the closure of a school; (ii) the merger of two or more schools; (iii) a change to integrated status; and (iv) any other development proposals, have been determined by the department since 8 May 2007.

(AQW 3688/08)

The Minister of Education: The table below summarises the number of school Development Proposals submitted to the Department in each of the last five years and since May 2007 dealing with

- the closure of a school
- the amalgamation and merger of two or more schools
- a change to integrated status
- all other Development Proposals

Liostaíodh Moltaí Forbartha sa bhliain inar foilsíodh iad.

Please note that Development Proposals have been listed in the year in which they were published.

DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT

	(i) the closure of a school	(ii) the merger or amalgamation of two or more schools	(iii) a change to integrated status	(iv) all other Development Proposals	Total by year
2003	5	9	2	29	45
2004	4	3	0	12	19
2005	12	3	1	18	34
2006	18	4	6	17	45
2007	7	3	3	25	38
Total by type	46	22	12	101	181
Since May 2007	4	0	2	14	20

Of the proposals detailed as submitted to the Department, decisions on fifteen Development Proposals are pending.

School Development Proposals

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of school development proposals dealing with (i) the closure of a school; (ii) the merger of two or more schools; (iii) a change to integrated status; and (iv) any other development proposals, that have been determined by the department in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3704/08)

The Minister of Education: The table below summarises the number of school Development Proposals submitted to the Department in each of the last five years and since May 2007 dealing with

- the closure of a school
- the amalgamation and merger of two or more schools
- a change to integrated status
- all other Development Proposals

Liostaíodh Moltaí Forbartha sa bhliain inar foilsíodh iad.

Please note that Development Proposals have been listed in the year in which they were published.

DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT

	(i) the closure of a school	(ii) the merger or amalgamation of two or more schools	(iii) a change to integrated status	(iv) all other Development Proposals	Total by year
2003	5	9	2	29	45
2004	4	3	0	12	19
2005	12	3	1	18	34
2006	18	4	6	17	45
2007	7	3	3	25	38
Total by type	46	22	12	101	181
Since May 2007	4	0	2	14	20

Of the proposals detailed as submitted to the Department, decisions on fifteen Development Proposals are pending.

Consultancy Firms

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of occasions her department has employed the services of consultancy firms; (ii) the work completed on each occasion; and (iii) the costs incurred by her department, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3714/08)

The Minister of Education: D'fhostaigh an Roinn seirbhísí chomhlachtaí Sainchomhairliúcháin ar roinnt ócáidí le 5 bliana anuas. Tugtar achoimre ar líon na n-ócáidí agus ar na costais a bhain leo do gach ceann de na 5 bliana airgeadais seo caite sa tábla thíos.

The Department have employed the services of Consultancy firms on a number of occasions over the last 5 years. A summary of the number of occasions and the costs incurred is contained in the table below for each of the last 5 financial years.

Department of Education		
Financial Year	Number of occasions in which Consultancy Services were employed	£
2002/03	16	£217,359.53
2003/04	50	£510,432.00
2004/05	37	£765,799.21
2005/06	46	£532,244.15
2006/07	44	£905,600.57

A breakdown of the work completed on each occasion is detailed in the following tables in each of the respective financial years.

CONSULTANCY SERVICES EMPLOYED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION IN FINANCIAL YEAR 2002/03

Consultancy work carried out
Accounts Branch
LMS Common Funding Formula
LMS Common Funding Formula
Pay Flexibility
Review of ARNE
Review of ELB Chief Executives' Pay
Mail sweeper Training
Access to DE Network by Inspectors
Inventory/ISU Service desk
Clustered Firewall
Desktop Publishing
Assist General Consultancy
Web Analysis
Information Needs Analysis
Security Assessment of DE Network
Consultancy Support for Development of Business Case for Teachers Systems Replacement

CONSULTANCY SERVICES EMPLOYED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION IN FINANCIAL YEAR 2003/04

Consultancy work carried out
Scoping study on European Strategy
Review of Business Education
Catering Advisor
Nutritional Standards Pilot
Senior Management Development
Senior Management Development
Senior Management Development
Senior Management Development
Senior Management Development
GMI School management problems
GMI School management problems
Organisational Review and Process mapping
Preparation of DE file plan
Review of PS Support
Review of PS Support
Facilitation of AA/AO workshops

Management Project (Waterside)
Harassment Investigation
Harassment Investigation
Balance creditors for school building projects
Fixed asset note for 2002/03 Accounts
Whole of Government Accounts
Oracle migration
Economic appraisals
Belfast Door project
Review of teacher demand model
Health and Safety - Traffic Investigation
Health and Safety - DSE workplace assessments
Health and Safety - DSE workplace assessments
Health and Safety - Traffic Investigation
Youth Services
EU Special Funding Initiatives
Planning and Accountability Review
Electronic repository of research in the north of Ireland
Admissions criteria as part of post primary education
Post primary review of post primary education
Facilitation of AA/AO away day
Evaluation of Inspection process
Editing of Edlines magazine
Graphic design for DE corporate identity
Media training
Advertising campaign
Middletown
Conversion of XML files to CSV format
Software development for web content management
Implementation of new software
Surf control software
Web Analyst (for ETI)
E-Business strategy
Teacher's System business case

CONSULTANCY SERVICES EMPLOYED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION IN FINANCIAL YEAR 2004/05

Consultancy work carried out
Focus group with year 8 re current transfer process
Suitable admissions criteria - part of Costello work
Facilitate strategic planning

Facilitate strategic planning
Facilitate strategic planning
Investigation into suspected fraud
Planning and Accountability
SFIU EU audit
ICT Governance Review
Web Review
ICT Governance Review
Legal advice
Advice on refurbishment of property
Special education and needs
English as an additional language review
Advice on the quality of PPP projects
Improving performance thro culture change
Project management support
Health and Safety Risk assessment
Internal Audit
Financial systems
Review of home to school transport
Catering advisor
Nutritional standards
Completion of EAs
Article 10 checks
Procurement & delivery arrangements for schools estate
Suspension and expulsion procedures
Suspension and expulsion procedures
Professional services
Organisational review
Organisational review and process mapping
SCS structure
Transforming education
Transforming education
Transforming education
Review of ETI and DE/DEL/DCAL

CONSULTANCY SERVICES EMPLOYED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION IN FINANCIAL YEAR 2005/06

Consultancy work carried out
English as an additional language consultation
Facilitation of Education Partners and DE for a Strategic Planning Workshop to update the Strategic Plan for Education
Evaluation

Assessment
Corporate Development
Governance
Audit of Development Branch
Audit of School Improvement Branch
EU Art 10 checks
Art 10 Checks 2004 (50% fixed fee)
Audit of DE Personnel and Development Services Branch
Audit of Finance Branch
Audit of Post Primary Review Team
Risk Management Review
Data Mining
Data Mining
Network Health Check
CLAS Consultant
Policy Review of Teacher Education in the north of Ireland
Teachers' Pay/Pensions Project Support
TPPAB culture change
Review of suspension and expulsion procedures
Consultation on new admissions arrangements
To assess unavoidable costs of operating a specific school on a split site in 2004/05 in an effective and efficient manner and provide an estimate of the total unavoidable costs of operating the split site across the period 1999/2000 to 2004/05
Corporate Identity Proposal
Provide Graphics for existing stands
Editorial support and project management for Edlines
To assess viability of desktop publishing unit and provide findings
OBC for PPP schemes
OBC for PPP schemes
Procurement & Delivery arrangements for schools estate
Alternative Education Provision
Autism Spectrum Disorders
Review of Statistics & Research Branch
Keying of Census Forms
Equal Opportunities Investigation
Holy Cross College - PPP Procurement - Advice on Project Procurement Guidance and Law
Middletown
Middletown
Middletown
Middletown

Middletown
Middletown
Evaluation of Nutritional Standards pilot scheme
DE catering Advisor
Review of Home to School Transport policy

CONSULTANCY SERVICES EMPLOYED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION IN FINANCIAL YEAR 2006/07

Consultancy work carried out
Business Education Strategy Unit Review
Provision of Support to assist with RPA implementation
Recruitment assistance - Recruitment of ESA CE Designate
Preparation of Workshop Materials
Printing of RPA Newsletter
RPA Newsletter design
Development of Communications Strategy
EQIA Training
English as an additional language consultation
Evaluation
Re-assessment
Governance
Governance
Governance
Governance
Audit of School Improvement Branch
Audit of Development Branch
Audit of School Admin Branch
Audit of PPP & SU
Audit of Teachers Negotiating Committee Branch
IT Hardware Review
Network Health Check
Teachers' Pay/Pensions Project Support
Teachers' Pay/Pensions Project Support
Review of suspension and expulsion procedures
Audit on external communications
Independent Strategic Review of Education
Facilitation exercise for Mid/South Down post primary provision
Procurement & Delivery arrangements for schools estate
Alternative Education Provision
Bullying in schools
PISA Additional analysis

Teachers Vacancies Survey
Review of Research, Monitoring and Advice
Keying of Census Forms
NI Schools Modernisation Programme
NI Schools Modernisation Programme
NI Schools Modernisation Programme
Middletown
Middletown
Middletown
Middletown
DE catering Advisor
Review of Home to School Transport policy

Consultancy Firms

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of occasions the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) has employed the services of consultancy firms; (ii) the work completed on each occasion; and (iii) the costs incurred by the SEELB, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3715/08)

The Minister of Education: Sa tábla atá ceangailte leis seo tá sonraí curtha ar fáil ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt d'obair a rinne comhlachtaí sainchomhairliúcháin don Bhord sna 5 bliana seo caite.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board has provided the information in the attached table which details the work completed by consultancy firms for the Board in the last 5 years.

SEELB: WORK CARRIED OUT BY CONSULTANCY FIRMS

Year	Company	Project	Amount Paid
2003/04	Price Waterhouse Coopers	Bangor Nendrum PPP	£201,832
	Farrell Grant Sparks Ltd	Lagan College/Tor Bank PPP	£74,038
2004/05	Price Waterhouse Coopers	Bangor Nendrum PPP	£136,752
	Ernst & Ernst	Financial Modelling	£3,656

Year	Company	Project	Amount Paid
2005/06	Price Waterhouse Coopers	Bangor Nendrum PPP	£245,683
	Mouchel Parkman Services	Special Education Project	£46,891
	Farrell Grant Sparks Ltd	Lagan College/Tor Bank PPP	£13,919
	KPMG	Financial Management Review	£16,343
2006/07	Price Waterhouse Coopers	Bangor Nendrum PPP	£349,820
	Farrell Grant Sparks Ltd	Lagan College/Tor Bank PPP	£141,537
	KPMG	Financial Management Review	£48,804
	Deloitte & Touche	Lisburn Library PPP	£21,200
2007/08	Price Waterhouse Coopers	Bangor Nendrum PPP	£130,232

Improper Conduct

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of Education Board employees, including teachers, who have been formally warned by their Boards in the last five years for (i) improper conduct with school pupils; (ii) sexually inappropriate behaviour with school pupils; and (iii) internet contact with school pupils. (AQW 3769/08)

The Minister of Education: Matters causing concern to school management and or employing authorities which give rise to the initiation of a formal warning to board employees, including teachers are not made known to the Department.

The Department would only be made aware of cases when employees make a referral to the Department where employees have been dismissed for misconduct, whether or not they were convicted of a criminal offence, or where they would have been dismissed or considered for dismissal, had it not been for their resignation, retirement or redundancy.

Déanfaidh an Roinn machnamh ar cé acu ba chóir fostaíocht an duine sin mar mhúinteoir nó mar fhostaí a theorannú nó a chosc má shíltear go mbeadh páistí i mbail.

The Department will then consider whether or not to prohibit or restrict the individual's further employment as a teacher or employee where it is felt that children would be at risk.

Education Board Employees

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education to detail the restrictions placed on Education Board employees, including teachers, regarding their contact with pupils, both during and outside school hours.

(AQW 3770/08)

The Minister of Education: Employers must have a pastoral care policy which should contain a child protection policy which reflects both its legal duties and pastoral care responsibilities. Employers should ensure that a Code of Conduct for employees within the education sector whose work brings them into contact with children and young people exists within either the child protection or pastoral care policies.

Employers must not employ anyone to work in an educational setting in a paid, unpaid or voluntary capacity, who is included in the Disqualification from Working with Children List held by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), the Unsuitable Persons' List held by the Department of Education (DE), List 99 or who has a disqualification order from the courts. Any person who is convicted of an offence listed in the Schedule to the Education (Prohibition from Teaching or Working with Children) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 is automatically prohibited from working with children and included in the Department's Unsuitable Persons' List. Persons convicted of lesser offences listed in the Schedule are subsequently allowed to make representations to the Department against being listed.

Faoi Alt 30 den Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults Northern Ireland) Order 2003 is coir ag duine ar bith atá ar an Liosta Daoine Neamhfhoiristeanacha atá i seilbh na RO, nó atá ar an Liosta Daoine atá Dicháilithe ó Oibriú le Páistí atá i seilbh na RSSSP, nó a bhfuil ordú dicháilithe ó na cúirteanna air, fostaíocht le páistí a iarraidh nó a ghlacadh go feasach.

Is cion é de réir Airteagal 30 den Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 duine atá ar liosta de Dhaoine Mí-Oiriúnacha i seilbh na Roinne Oideachais, ar Liosta Dicháiliú ó Bheith ag Obair le Páistí i seilbh na Roinne Sláinte, nó a fuair ordú dicháilithe ó chur isteach go feasach ar a bheith ag obair le páistí nó le glacadh le fostaíocht le páistí.

Article 30 of the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 makes it an offence for any person included in the Unsuitable Persons' List held by DE, the Disqualification from Working with Children List held by DHSSPS, or who has a disqualification order from the courts to knowingly apply for or accept employment with children.

Waste Produced

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of waste produced by the department that is recycled. (AQW 3794/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education operates a Waste Management programme, in line with DE's Waste Management Action Plan.

The Department of Education operates from 3 sites,

- Rathgael House, Bangor
- Waterside House, Derry
- Forestview, Belfast

All waste is carefully segregated and presented for recycling with a number of Collection Agencies. Individual colour coded containers have been made available for staff to play their part in waste management and recycling.

The following table lists the most commonly recycling waste.

% RECYCLING

Paper	100%	All sites specialist collection weekly
Cardboard	100%	All sites specialist collection weekly
Magazines/Phonebooks	100%	
Furniture	75%	Returned for Repair/ Refurbishment
	25%	Charities
Electrical Equipment Computer Products	100%	Specialist collection on request locally
Metal Products	100%	Segregated and collected by specialist
Photocopier Products Toners etc	100%	Specialist collection monthly
Polystyrene/Plastic	100%	
Wooden Pallets	100%	Locally

Níl an liosta thuas uileghabhálach; breithneofar aon earraí breise nach bhfuil sonraithe thuas i gcomhair athchúrsála, más cuí, agus rachfar i dteagmháil leis na gníomhaireachtaí ábhartha.

The above list is not exhaustive, any additional items not specified above, will be considered for recycling where appropriate and relevant agencies contacted.

Roman Catholic Teachers

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the percentage; and (ii) the number of Roman

Catholic teachers currently employed in primary schools in (a) the controlled sector; and (b) the voluntary maintained sector. (AQW 3836/08)

The Minister of Education: Ní fhostaíonn an Roinn múinteoirí agus níl aon eolas staitistiúil aici ar mhiondealú múinteoirí de réir creidimh.

The Department does not employ teachers and does not hold statistical information on the religious breakdown of teachers.

Teachers Currently Employed

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the total number of teachers currently employed in primary schools. (AQW 3837/08)

The Minister of Education: Is é 7975 líon iomlán na múinteoirí atá fostaíte i mbunscoileanna faoi láthair.

The total number of teachers currently employed in primary schools is 7975.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education to outline the progress made (i) in the Executive; (ii) in the Committee for Education; and (iii) in the Assembly, in relation to securing a consensus for her proposals on post-primary transfer. (AQW 3856/08)

The Minister of Education: Bhí plé agam ar an cheist seo san Fheidhmeannas agus bhí mé os comhair an Choiste Oideachais ar 31 Eanáir 2008. Tá plé ag dul ar aghaidh le réimse páirtithe leasmhara oideachais. Cuirfidh seo ar mo chumas plé a bhfuil dlúth agus inneach ann a bheith agam leis an Fheidhmeannas, le Coiste Oideachais an Tionóil agus ráiteas a dhéanamh sa Tionól.

I have had discussions on this issue in the Executive and I appeared before the Education Committee on 31 January 2008. Discussions with a range of education interests are ongoing. In the near future, these will enable me to have discussions of substance with the Executive, the Assembly Education Committee and make a statement in the Assembly.

Dickson Plan

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education to detail how her proposals for post-primary transfer will apply to each of the schools that currently operate under the Dickson Plan. (AQW 3858/08)

The Minister of Education: Socrófar soláthar iar-bhunscoile taobh istigh de cheantar Phlean Dickson

ar an dóigh chéanna le soláthar i ngach ceantar eile, trí phróiseas pleanála ceantarbhunaithe, agus oibreoidh scoileanna taobh istigh den cheantar sin faoi na rialacháin chéanna um chritéir iontrála le scoileanna i gceantair eile.

Post-primary provision within the Dickson Plan area will be determined in the same way as provision in all other areas, through an area based planning process, and schools within that area will operate under the same admissions criteria regulations as schools in other areas.

Gaelscoileanna Accommodation

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister of Education to provide a timescale within which her department (i) will be in a position to make a decision on whether or not Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta is entitled to rent accommodation for Gaelscoileanna; and (ii) will make arrangements to pay for the rent of accommodation for Gaelscoileanna. (AQW 3878/08)

The Minister of Education: Officials in my Department have been liaising with Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta (InaG) on the entitlement to rent for approved accommodation under the Local Management of Schools policy.

Tá eolas breise ar chóiríocht á lorg ó InaG leis an beart a chríochnú agus beidh an t-amscála le seo a dhéanamh ag brath ar iomlán an eolais atá riachtanach a bheith ar fail

Additional information on premises is being sought from InaG to help complete the exercise and the timescale for doing so will be dependent on having all the necessary information.

C2K Helpdesk

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 3374/08, to detail the actual costs incurred by each school in calling the C2K helpdesk, in the last year. (AQW 3899/08)

The Minister of Education: Ní furasta eolas a fháil ar an dóigh atá molta, agus ní thiocfadh a fháil ach ar chostas díréireach.

Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. The cost of the calls to the C2K Help Desk number would have to be extracted from each school's telephone bill.

C2K Helpdesk

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail, in relation to the C2K Helpdesk (i) the number of staff involved; (ii) the related staff costs; and (iii) its total running costs. (AQW 3901/08)

The Minister of Education: Ní foireann C2k atá i mbun líne chabhrach C2k. Foinsítear allamuigh ag Hewlett Packard i mar chuid den chonradh le líonra achair fhairsing, lúdracht agus seirbhísí lánaontaithe a sholáthar ar chostas £660,000 sa bhliain. Tá 15 ball foirne de chuid Hewlett Packard i mbun na gnúthán.

The C2k helpdesk is not staffed by C2k employees. It is outsourced to Hewlett Packard as part of the contract for the delivery of wide area network, connectivity and integration services to every school in the north of Ireland at a cost of £660,000 per annum. Calls are handled by 15 Hewlett Packard staff.

C2K Helpdesk

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost per annum of employing Northgate/Hewlett Packard to support the C2K Helpdesk. (AQW 3904/08)

The Minister of Education: The C2k Help Desk is outsourced to Hewlett Packard at a cost of £660,000 per annum as part of the contract for the delivery of wide area network, connectivity and integration services to every school in the north of Ireland.

Níl eolas faoi chostais a bhaineann le glaoanna a atreorú chuig Northgate Information Solutions ar fáil go héasca agus níorbh fhéidir seo a fháil ach ar chostas díréireach.

Information in relation to the costs associated with calls referred to Northgate Information Solutions is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Portadown College

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the progress of the building project at Portadown College. (AQW 3936/08)

The Minister of Education: The Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) have undertaken a revision to the economic appraisal (EA) as a new road layout on site was set to impact on the building project for the school.

Chuir BOLO BE athmheasta faoi bhráid na Roinne i Mí Dheireadh Fómhair 2007 agus faoi láthair tá sé ag comhairleoirí gairmiúla na Roinne i gcomhair breithnithe agus ceadaithe. Aon uair amháin a cheadófar

an BE, rachaidh an tionscadal chuig na céimeanna pleanála mionsonraithe

A revised EA was submitted to the Department by the SELB in October 2007 and is currently with the Department's professional advisors for consideration and approval. Once the EA is approved the project will proceed to detailed planning stages.

School Closure

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of (i) controlled; (ii) maintained; (iii) integrated; (iv) voluntary grammar; and (v) Irish medium schools that have been closed in each of the last 3 years; and to detail the pupil enrolment in each school at the time of closure. (AQW 3943/08)

The Minister of Education: Table below summarises the number of school closures in each of the last three years.

Table B summarises the number of amalgamations of two or more schools in each of the last three years.

Soláthraítear liosta de na scoileanna agus líon na ndaltaí ar rolla i mbliain a ndruidte. Glacadh líon na ndaltaí ar rolla ó Shonraí i nDaonáireamh Scoile Mhí Dheireadh Fómhair na scoilbhliana ábhartha.

A list of the schools involved and pupil enrolments in the year of closure is also provided. The enrolments are from the October Schools Census Data for the relevant school year.

	(i) Controlled	(ii) Maintained	(iii) Integrated	(iv) Voluntary Grammar	(v) Irish Medium	Total
2005	2	1	0	1 (Prep Dept)	0	4
2006	8	2	0	0	0	10
2007	10	2	0	0	1 (IM Unit)	13
Total Closures	20	5	0	1	1	27

TABLE B: CLOSURES DUE TO AMALGAMATION OF TWO OR MORE SCHOOLS.

NUMBERS OF SCHOOLS AMALGAMATING.

	(i) Controlled	(ii) Maintained	(iii) Integrated	(iv) Voluntary Grammar	(v) Irish Medium	Total
2005	9	5	0	1	0	15

	(i) Controlled	(ii) Maintained	(iii) Integrated	(iv) Voluntary Grammar	(v) Irish Medium	Total
2006	0	4	0	0	0	4
2007	3	6	0	0	0	9
Total Closures	12	15	0	1	0	28

SCHOOL CLOSURES BY SECTOR 2005 TO 2007 INCLUSIVE**2005**

School	Date of Closure	Enrolment in Year of Closure
Controlled		
Antiville PS, Larne (NEELB)	31/08/05	57
Granville PS, Dungannon (SELB)	31/08/05	21
Maintained		
St Mary's PS (Laught), Drumquin	31/08/05	10
Voluntary Grammar		
Portadown College Preparatory Dept	31/08/05	23

2006

School	Date of Closure	Enrolment in Year of Closure
Controlled		
Mersey Street PS Belfast (BELB)	31/08/06	80
Glenarm PS (NEELB)	31/08/06	20
Larne Nursery School * ¹ (NEELB)	31/08/06	52
Lisnamurrigan PS, Broughshane (NEELB)	31/08/06	31
Masserene Community College, Antrim (NEELB)	31/08/06	189
Ardmore PS, Derryadd (SELB)	31/08/06	15
Loughbrickland PS (SELB)	31/08/06	22
Stragowna PS, Kinawley (WELB)	31/08/06	15
Maintained		
St Mary's PS, Aghadowey	31/08/06	19
All Saints PS, (Ballela), Banbridge	31/08/06	14

*¹ A nursery unit was opened at Linn PS, Larne at meet the demand for pre-school places.

2007

School	Date of Closure	Enrolment in Year of Closure
Controlled		
Mount Gilbert Community College (BELB)	31/08/07	94
Ballycastle Nursery School * ¹ (NEELB)	31/08/07	26
Ballyduff PS, Newtownabbey (NEELB)	31/08/07	24
Charley Memorial PS, Dunmurry (SEELB)	31/08/07	10
Drumbo PS (SEELB)	31/08/07	12
Groomsport PS (SEELB)	31/08/07	25
Hillhall PS, Lisburn (SEELB)	31/08/07	39
Lambeg PS (SEELB)	31/08/07	23
Eglis PS, Dungannon (SELB)	31/08/07	11
Tullymacarette PS, Dromore (SELB)	31/08/07	14
Maintained		
St Mary's PS, Ballygowan	31/08/07	3
St Joseph's HS, Plumbridge	31/08/07	85
Irish-Medium		
Irish-medium Unit at St Patrick's PS, Gortin	31/08/07	4

*¹ A replacement nursery unit opened at Ballycastle Controlled Integrated PS at 1/9/2007.

SCHOOL CLOSURES DUE TO AMALGAMATIONS OF TWO OR MORE SCHOOLS**2005**

School	Date of Closure	Enrolment in Year of Closure
Controlled		
Dervaghroy PS, Sixmilecross * ¹ (WELB)	21/02/05	22
Hutton PS, Beragh, Sixmilecross * ¹	21/02/05	29
Sixmilecross PS * ¹	21/02/05	91
Clough PS, Downpatrick (SEELB) * ²	30/04/05	115
Downshire PS, Dundrum * ²	30/04/05	24
Hillsborough PS (SEELB) * ³	31/08/05	386
Newport PS, Hillsborough * ³	31/08/05	39
Annaghmore PS, Portadown (SELB) * ⁴	31/08/05	70
Tullyroan PS, Dungannon	31/08/05	29
Maintained		
St Catherine's PS, Belfast * ⁵	31/08/05	167

School	Date of Closure	Enrolment in Year of Closure
St Gall's PS, Belfast * ⁵	31/08/05	196
St John's PS, Belfast * ⁵	31/08/05	102
St Colman's HS, Strabane * ⁶	31/08/05	686
Our Lady of Mercy HS, Strabane * ⁶	31/08/05	300
Convent Grammar School, Strabane * ⁶	31/08/05	595

*¹ Amalgamated to become Cooley PS.

*² Amalgamated to become Cumran PS.

*³ Amalgamated to become Downshire PS.

*⁴ Amalgamated to become Orchard PS.

*⁵ Amalgamated to become St Clare's PS.

*⁶ Amalgamated to become Holy Cross College on existing sites; new-build school in planning.

2006

School	Date of Closure	Enrolment in Year of Closure
Maintained		
St Malachy's HS Antrim * ¹	31/08/06	136
St Olcan's HS, Randalstown * ¹	31/08/06	373
St Mary's Boys PS, Rostrevor * ²	31/08/06	122
Convent of Mercy PS, Rostrevor * ²	31/08/06	92

*¹ Amalgamated to become St Benedict's College, Randalstown on the former St Olcan's HS site.

*² Amalgamated to become St Bronagh's PS, Rostrevor

2007

School	Date of Closure	Enrolment in Year of Closure
Controlled		
Crossgar PS (SEELB) * ¹	31/08/07	52
Drumaghlin PS (SEELB) * ¹	31/08/07	36
Dungiven PS (WELB) * ²	31/08/07	17
Maintained		
All Saints PS, Ballymena * ³	31/08/07	216
St Joseph's PS, Ballymena * ³	31/08/07	73
St Louis' PS, Ballymena * ³	31/08/07	284
St Mary's PS, Ballymena * ³	31/08/07	45
St James' PS, Tandragee * ⁴	31/08/07	14
St Joseph's PS, Poyntzpass * ⁴	31/08/07	96

*¹ Amalgamated to become Glasswater PS at Crossgar PS site.

*² Closed as first phase of the amalgamation of Dungiven PS, Burnfoot PS and Largy PS.

*³ Amalgamated into 2 new schools – St Colmille's PS Ballymena and St Brigid's PS, Ballymena.

*⁴ Amalgamated to become St James' and St Joseph's PS, Poyntzpass on the St Joseph's site.

Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Education to detail the average length of time it takes for a child to be statemented, in relation to Autistic Spectrum Disorder. (AQW 3953/08)

The Minister of Education: The prescribed time limit for completion of a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) from the date that the request to carry out an assessment is received by an Education and Library Board from either a parent or a school is 26 weeks regardless of a child's individual SEN, subject to the exemptions outlined in the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs.

Ní choinníonn an Roinn Oideachais an meánfhad ama le ráiteas a bhronnadh ar pháiste, agus is é comhairle a fhaighim ó Phríomh-Fheidhmeannaigh na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, nach bhfuil figiúirí do na catagóirí éagsúla sainriachtanas oideachasúil ar fáil taobh istigh den amscála.

The Department of Education does not hold the average length of time it takes for a child to be statemented and I am advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that separate figures for the various categories of special educational needs are not available within the timescale.

Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Education to detail the waiting times for services from Longstone Outreach Support Services, for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder who live in West Belfast. (AQW 3954/08)

The Minister of Education: Níl aon liosta feithimh ann ar sheirbhísí ó Sheirbhísí Tacaíochta For-rochtana na Cloiche Fada, do pháistí le Neamhord Speictrim Uathaigh (NSU) a chónaíonn in Iarthar Bhéal Feirste. Is é comhairle a fuair mé ó Phríomh-Feidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oir-Dheiscirt: cé go dtairgeann Scoil Speisialta na Cloiche Fada seirbhís tacaíochta for-rochtana do shaindeacrachtaí foghlama, do thacaíocht iompair agus do mheándeacrachtaí foghlama, ní thairgeann siad an tseirbhís seo do NSU.

There is no waiting list for services from Longstone Outreach Support Services for children with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) who live in West Belfast. I have been advised by the Chief Executive of the South-

Eastern Education and Library Board that while Longstone Special School offers an outreach support service for specific learning difficulties, behaviour support and moderate learning difficulties it does not do so for ASD.

Ministerial Commitments

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail her ministerial commitments for Thursday 31 January, 2008. (AQW 3979/08)

The Minister of Education: Déardaoin 31 Eanáir 2008, bhí na ceangaltais aire seo a leanas orm:

On Thursday 31 January 2008, I had the following ministerial commitments:

Media Briefing	Education Committee	Meeting with Special Advisor	Pre-Executive Meeting With Party	Executive Meeting	Media Interviews
9.00 – 9.30am	10.00 – 11.00am	11.00 – 11.30am	11.30am – 12.30pm	1.30 – 3.30pm	3.30pm

Review of Public Administration

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to give a timescale within which education legislation in relation to the Review of Public Administration will be introduced. (AQW 3981/08)

The Minister of Education: Beidh dhá Acht Tionóil riachtanach leis an Athbhreithniú ar Riarachán Poiblí san oideachas a chur i bhfeidhm. Tá sé beartaithe go lorgfar cead an Fheidhmeannais a luaithe is féidir leis an chéad Bhille a thabhairt isteach. Ní féidir, áfach, dáta beacht a thabhairt san am seo. Is rún go dtabharfar an dara Bille isteach taobh istigh de bhliain ón am a thabharfar isteach an chéad Bhille.

The implementation of the Review of Public Administration in education will require two Acts of the Assembly. It is intended that Executive approval to introduce the first Bill will be sought as soon as possible. However it is not possible to give a precise date at this time. The intention is that a second Bill will be introduced within a year of the first.

Community Relations Work

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Education to detail what funding will be available specifically for community relations work in schools in the year 2008/2009. (AQW 3994/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education provides funding to schools through the Schools' Community Relations Programme (SCRIP), which is administered by the Education and Library Boards (ELBs).

Tá críoch go fóill á cur ar leithdháiltí do na Boird éagsúla.

Allocations to individual ELBs are still being finalised.

Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of both pre-school age and school age children who are currently 'statemented' with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (i) confirmed as the diagnosis; or (ii) identified as a contributory element of an overall diagnosis, broken down by Education and Library Board. (AQW 4000/08)

The Minister of Education: An internal review has been undertaken by the Department of Education to identify the functions and potential staff that may transfer to the Education and Skills Authority.

Tá torthaí an athbhreithnithe seo á mbreithniú faoi láthair agus, mar sin de, níl aon eolas breise ar fáil ag an am seo.

The outcomes of this review are currently being considered and as such no further information is available at this time.

Conlig Primary School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education what her assessment is of the results of the second transformation process on integrated status for Conlig Primary School; and to confirm if she made a final decision on the future of Conlig Primary School. (AQW 4004/08)

The Minister of Education: Bhí deireadh leis an tréimhse inar féidir tuairimí agus agóidí ar Mholadh Forbartha a thairgeadh don Roinn ar 27 Nollaig 2007. Déanfaidh mé cinneadh ar an mholadh a luaithe is féidir.

The statutory two-month period during which comments and objections on a Development Proposal may be offered to the Department ended on 27 December 2007. I will make a decision on the proposal as soon as possible.

Communication Access

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education 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 4012/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education (DE) provides a number of communication aids to address the requirements of Hard of Hearing and Deaf Persons. These include:

- Portable induction Loop System
- Mini Com
- Telephone amplifier, which is approved by the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB)

In addition, a number of staff have been trained in Sign Language.

Cuireann láithreán gréasáin RO www.deni.gov.uk eolas ar fáil ar na háiseanna agus ar an dóigh ar féidir teacht orthu.

The DE website www.deni.gov.uk provides information about the facilities and how these can be accessed.

Omagh Integrated Primary School

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not she has concluded the economic appraisal for a new build scheme at Crevenagh Road for Omagh Integrated Primary School; and to provide a timescale for the completion of the planning and design stage for this new build scheme. (AQW 4021/08)

The Minister of Education: The economic appraisal, including the option of a new build scheme at Crevenagh Road for Omagh Integrated Primary School, has not yet been finalised due to planning problems relating to the school's need for vehicular access at that site. The Department is currently seeking a resolution to this problem with the school and other parties concerned.

Faoi réir ceadú riachtanach an bhreithmheasa a fháil ón Roinn, rachadh an scéim ar aghaidh chuig an chéim phleanála mionsonraithe agus dheartha, ach mar gheall ar na deacrachtaí reatha pleanála, ní féidir san am i láthair amscála do chríochnú na céime sin a chur ar fáil.

Subject to the necessary Departmental approval of the appraisal, the scheme would then proceed to the detailed planning and design stage, but due to the current planning difficulties, it is not currently possible to provide a timescale for the completion of that stage.

Meeting Requests

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of meeting requests she has received since May 2007. (AQW 4024/08)

The Minister of Education: Ó Mhí na Bealtaine 2007, fuair mé 253 iarratas ar chruinnithe.

Since May 2007, I have received 253 requests for meetings.

Academic Selection

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to clarify how educational experience/performance differs from academic selection. (AQW 4036/08)

The Minister of Education: Academic selection involves the use of academic admissions criteria – applied on the basis of an assessment of an applicant's academic ability. By way of contrast my proposals provide for a rounded picture of a child's education and aptitude for learning to be used to inform an advisory procedure which results in a parent and child determining the most suitable provision for a child.

D'oibreodh an nós imeachta comhairleach seo i gcomhthéacs nach bhfuil aon chritéir acadúla iontrála ann.

This advisory procedure would operate in a context where there are no academic admissions criteria.

Voluntary Redundancy

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teachers who have taken voluntary redundancy, in each of the Education and Library Boards, over the last three years. (AQW 4042/08)

The Minister of Education: Sholáthair Príomhfheidhmeannaigh na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne agus CSCC an t-eolas atá sonraithe sa tábla thíos.

The Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards and CCMS have provided the information detailed in the table below.

	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	Total
BELB	46	39	31	116
WELB	21	22	20	63
NEELB	63	67	49	179
SEELB	43	52	66	161
SELB	46	28	19	93
CCMS	145	175.2	209	529.2

	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	Total
Total	364	383.2	394	1141.2

Scoil Na Fuiséige Primary School

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons why work on the Scoil Na Fuiséige Primary School in Twinbrook has not yet started; and to provide a timescale within which it will start.

(AQW 4043/08)

The Minister of Education: Planning for the new school for Scoil Na Fuiséige Primary School is well advanced with a revised Stage D submission (final sketch plans and costs) having been sent to the Department last September. The Department's review of the submission has now been completed and a letter of approval will issue to the school Trustees shortly. A pre-tender submission will then be required from the school's design team. Following its receipt and consideration, tenders for the construction of the new school would be sought.

Táthar ag súil go dtosódh an obair san fhómhar faoi réir na próisis riachtanacha phleanála a bheith críochnaithe go sásúil.

It is hoped that construction work could commence in the autumn subject to the necessary planning processes being completed satisfactorily.

	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb
Witten Questions Answered	10	109	168	2	51	134	150	104	62	63*

* figure correct as at 19 February 2008

Computer Adaptive Testing

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not she (i) is familiar with; and (ii) has been independently briefed, on the Computer Adaptive Testing (CAT) procedure, which can be used to match children to the most appropriate second level school; and to detail the experts she has consulted on the issue.

(AQW 4099/08)

The Minister of Education: I am familiar with the general concept of Computer Adaptive Testing and also a proposal for using such tests to inform a system of post-primary transfer.

Tá mé eolach, ó m'fheidhmeannaigh, ar chomhairle neamhspleách ó phríomhacadóir oideachais agus fosta ar chomhairle ón Chomhairle Churaclaim, Scrúdúcháin agus Mheasúnaithe.

National Bookstart Programme

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the funding allocated to the National Bookstart Programme by her department, in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 4086/08)

The Minister of Education: To ask the Minister for Education to detail the funding allocated to the National Bookstart Programme by her department, in each of the last 5 years.

Chuir an Roinn Oideachais maoiniú ar fáil do chlár Bookstart le linn na tréimhse 2002/03 go 2005/06 mar seo a leanas:

The Department of Education provided funding for the Bookstart programme during the period 2002/03 to 2005/06 as follows: -

2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6
£50K	£50K	£25K	£265K

Assembly Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of written Assembly questions she has answered each month, since May 2007.

(AQW 4095/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sa tábla faoi iamh.

The information requested is detailed in the attached table

	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb
Witten Questions Answered	10	109	168	2	51	134	150	104	62	63*

* figure correct as at 19 February 2008

I am aware, through my officials, of independent advice from a leading educational academic and also advice from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment.

Nursery Schools

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education what consideration she has given to the transition of existing nursery schools to Centres of Excellence.

(AQW 4186/08)

The Minister of Education: Níor breithníodh stádas Ionad Barr Feabhais a bhronnadh ar naíscoileanna. San am i láthair tá mo Roinn ag obair ar straitéis Luathbhlianta do pháistí 0-6 bliana d'aois a scrúdóidh na socrúithe do sheirbhísí comhtháite.

No consideration has been given to awarding Centre of Excellence status to nursery schools. My Department is currently working on an Early Years strategy for 0-6 year olds which will examine the arrangements for integrated services.

Teachers Daily Rate Pay Scale

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the current hourly rate for teachers on the daily rate pay scale at (i) ordinary; and (ii) upper pay scales. (AQW 4199/08)

The Minister of Education: Only temporary teachers are paid on a daily rate, calculated at 1/195 of the appropriate point on the annual pay scale. The main and upper pay scales for teachers are as follows with effect from 1 September 2007:

Main Pay Scale	£	Upper Pay Scale	£
M1	20,133	UPS1	31,878
M2	21,726	UPS2	33,060
M3	23,472	UPS3	34,281
M4	25,278		
M5	27,270		
M6	29,427		

Is féidir an ráta san uair do mhúinteoir nach n-oibríonn laethanta iomlána a áireamh ach an ráta bliantúil a roinnt le 1265, uaslíon na n-uaireanta a oibríonn múinteoir lánaimseartha.

The hourly rate for a teacher working less than full days may be calculated by dividing the annual rate by 1265, which is the maximum number of hours worked by a full time teacher.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Department Discussions

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2897/08, to detail the discussions his department has had with (i) the Department for Work and Pensions; and (ii) the European Commission; and to outline his plans to make a statement. (AQW 3894/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): Departmental officials have contacted the Department for Work and Pensions to clarify the process involved and the information required to make

an application to the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund. There have been no further discussions with the European Commission. I have no plans at present to make a statement.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning 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 3903/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In my capacity as Minister for Employment and Learning I have met with delegations representing district councils on four occasions, and the Northern Ireland Local Government Association once. To date, I have not received a request to meet with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives.

Further Education Colleges

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the financial arrangements that are in place to ensure that (i) students from the Republic of Ireland can attend Further Education Colleges in Northern Ireland; and (ii) students from Northern Ireland can attend Further Education Colleges in the Republic of Ireland, without disadvantage. (AQW 3917/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: European Community Law requires all Member States to provide rights of access to education for migrant workers and citizens of the European Union. Therefore, all EU citizens, including those from the Republic of Ireland, are funded on the same basis as students from Northern Ireland and other parts of the UK.

These rights also apply to those accessing education in the Republic of Ireland.

Ban on Political Activity

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment he has made of the University of Ulster's ban on political activity on campus. (AQW 3930/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The University of Ulster is an independent autonomous institution responsible for its own policies

and practices and I have, therefore, no locus in this matter.

However, my officials have been informed by the University that there is no ban on the organisation of political activity on any of its campuses, as reflected in a protocol agreed between the University and the Students' Union.

The University has a policy of creating a politically neutral environment whilst recognising that political activity is a fundamental right devolved to the Students' Union and the activities undertaken by its Clubs and Societies. To this end, the University, in agreement with the Students' Union, has in place a protocol governing political activities involving the Students' Union, its Clubs and Societies and political parties wishing to undertake political activity on any of its campuses.

The protocol governs political meetings, recruitment to politically oriented Clubs and Societies and the use of University facilities for the purposes of political activity. For example, the Students' Union may be used for political meetings subject to the President's approval and the approval of the campus Provost. Similarly, politically oriented Clubs and Societies may also host a stall at the annual Fresher's Fayre (and any other open events), subject to a number of conditions. Flags and emblems must not be displayed on the stall and political leaflets may be displayed and made available, but not actively distributed. The Club or Society can, however, display the official logo of the 'parent' political party.

The University will allow recruitment on University premises to 'parent' political parties where this is organised in a closed room and subject to the conditions set out in the protocol, agreed with the Students' Union.

Written Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of written questions received since May 2007, and the average length of time taken to publish a response. (AQW 3978/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As at 15 February 2008 the Department for Employment and Learning has received 218 written AQs since May 2007. The average length of time taken to respond to Members is 6 working days.

Redundancy Payments

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment he has made of the impact that the decision to withhold redundancy payments

from college staff will have on regional college mergers. (AQW 3982/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Forty redundancies of further education (FE) lecturers have already been effected under the Teachers' Premature Retirement Scheme in the current financial year, following the merger of FE colleges on 1st August 2007. In view of the resource and other implications, no further redundancies can be supported under the Scheme in the 2007/08 year ending 31st March 2008. This does not rule out the possibility of further redundancies being effected under the Scheme later in the current academic year when they would normally occur. Any delay in the redundancy programme will be short-term and will not disrupt College re-organisation plans following mergers.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the criteria used in calculating eligibility for Education Maintenance Allowance. (AQW 3985/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Education Maintenance Allowance is an allowance for those students remaining at a school or a Further Education College and celebrate their 16th, 17, 18th or 19th birthdays between the 2nd July 2006 and the 1st July 2007. To be eligible you must be resident in the UK for three years prior to the 1st of September.

It is also a means tested allowance 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

Education Maintenance Allowance

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the amount of Education Maintenance Allowance paid in each constituency, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3986/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Education Maintenance Allowance scheme commenced at the beginning of the 2004/05 academic year. Data as requested is not readily available however the table below details the total amount of Education Maintenance Allowance paid to students in the last four academic years.

Academic Year	EMA Payments
2004 - 2005	£11,010,810
2005 - 2006	£19,986,650
2006 - 2007	£20,454,610
2007 - 22nd Jan 2008	£6,596,780

Education Maintenance Allowance

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the number of students who

have had applications for Education Maintenance Allowance refused; and (ii) the categories for refusal, detailed by number and percentage, broken down by parliamentary constituency, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3987/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Education Maintenance Allowance scheme commenced at the beginning of the 2004/05 academic year. Data as requested is not readily available in the format requested however the table below details (i) the number of students who have had applications for Education Maintenance Allowance refused; and (ii) the categories for refusal, detailed by number and percentage, in each of the last four academic years.

Academic Year	2004 - 2005		2005 - 2006		2006 - 2007		2007 - 22nd Jan 2008	
Total Applications	11645		19883		21151		21185	
(i) Applications Refused	680		783		756		754	
(ii) Category for Refusal	No:	%	No:	%	No:	%	No:	%
Household income too high	355	3.05%	684	3.44%	604	2.86%	590	2.78%
Age not within eligible age range	309	2.65%	59	0.30%	59	0.28%	69	0.33%
Learning centre not recognised	16	0.14%	31	0.16%	34	0.16%	69	0.33%
HH address not in UK	0	0.00%	9	0.05%	19	0.09%	17	0.08%
Application outside deadline	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	40	0.19%	0	0.00%
FE DARD Bursary Indicated	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	9	0.04%

Education Maintenance Allowance

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to confirm whether or not student income is taken into consideration when assessing applications for Education Maintenance Allowance; and to detail what measures are in place to ensure that this information is disclosed. (AQW 3988/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Education Maintenance Allowance applications are assessed on the basis of the annual income of the household in which the prospective applicant resides; this is generally the income of the parents. Generally, any income received by the student is not taken into account. Student income is only taken into account where students are estranged or living independently from their parents and are not in receipt of income support.

Applications will not be processed if the section of the application form dealing with household income has not been completed.

Communication Access

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning 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 4011/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: (i) Jobs and Benefits Offices (JBOs)

All JBOs incorporate the Induction Loop system. The Queue Management System, which is also available in all JBOs, provides an auditory and visual indicator showing position in queue. In addition, a number of the operational staff in JBOs have been provided with sign language training.

Careers Service

The Careers Service employs professionally trained Careers Advisers who are based in Job Centres,

Jobs and Benefits Offices and Careers Offices throughout Northern Ireland and also deliver services in most post-primary schools.

Further Education (FE)

Assistance available to students with hearing impairments attending FE Colleges will depend on the degree of impairment and the nature of the course attended. This can be arranged with the College concerned.

Higher Education

The Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) allows the Department to fund the Register of Support Providers which is available to all disabled students, including those with hearing difficulties, who are in Higher Education.

Industrial and Fair Employment Tribunal

5 of the Tribunal's 9 hearing rooms have a Loop System. A portable Loop System can be transferred between the other rooms as necessary. Interpreters from RNID can also be provided and paid for by the Office of the Tribunals.

Training for Success

Where a young person entering the Training for Success (TfS) initiative has special needs, including hearing difficulties, the Department funds a number of Specialist Support Providers to assist their participation.

Meeting Requests

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of meeting requests he has received since May 2007. (AQW 4025/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: From May 2007 to date, I have received 150 formal meeting requests.

Bamford Report

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the measures put in place to address issues relevant to his department contained in the Bamford Report. (AQW 4037/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Bamford Review and seven of its subsequent Reports include recommendations that have implications for the Department for Employment and Learning. I met recently with Professor Roy McConnell, Chair of the Bamford Group, and discussed with him the measures that are already in place within the Department. The meeting was very positive and I

have made the offer of further engagement between my officials and the Group.

The Department for Employment and Learning has already an extensive range of programmes designed to help and support people with mental ill health or learning disability to find work and to stay in work. DEL must engage with all eligible clients, regardless of the type of condition or disability and would be difficult to direct resources at those with mental ill-health to the detriment of people with other conditions/disabilities and in the absence of additional resources specifically for this group. However, in addition to the recent Strategic Review of the Disablement Advisory Service carried out by the sector, DEL is in the process of commissioning the Education and Training Inspectorate to review standards of provision and identify any actual gaps in provision for disabled people in DEL's client group across Further Education and Training.

Many of the Bamford recommendations are already a feature of existing policy and activity, including actions on the back of the Transitions Report. The Pathways Programme for new Incapacity Benefit Claimants is the latest addition to the portfolio. Working in close collaboration with DHSSPS and health service practitioners this includes a Condition Management Programme (CMP) offering one on one support from specially trained DEL advisers to provide referral to health care professionals. CMP offers an innovative and highly effective service to Incapacity Benefit claimants through the establishment of a strong partnership between not only DHSSPS and DEL, but also with colleagues delivering mainstream health services. CMP provision is complimented by other elements of the Pathways initiative such as work tasters and workplace support.

Further Education colleges are required by legislation to make adjustments to allow people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to access their mainstream courses. The Additional Support Fund (£1.5m) provides for technical and/or human support. A further £1.5m was made available in 2007/08 to enable colleges to meet the additional related costs of reduced classroom sizes and additional lecturer contact time, classroom assistants and so on when delivering discrete (i.e. specialised) provision in Colleges or outreach centres.

One of the Bamford Recommendations calls for dedicated places across the FE sector for severely learning disabled individuals. The extent of personal and health care needed to support severely learning disabled renders this an unworkable proposition in an FE setting and the needs of these individuals are more effectively managed in specialist settings. FE colleges are already working with such individuals on an outreach basis and the scope to do more in this area will be explored.

Further Education College and Library in Cookstown

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in light of the joint approach between his department and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure 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 4116/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department is always willing to examine the potential for cross departmental working, where there is an opportunity to do so and where such an approach provides the value for money solution. Although there are no opportunities to replicate this joint approach at present we would be happy to consider the feasibility of such partnerships in the future.

The South West College will also be carrying out a Post Project Evaluation, with the Education and Library Board, of the Further Education campus / Library later this year. This will examine the outcome of the joint project against the expected benefits to ensure that the lessons learned are fed back into the decision-making process.

Curriculum Vitae

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the help in writing a curriculum vitae that is available through his department, to people seeking a return to work. (AQW 4207/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department for Employment and Learning offers a range of assistance in writing a curriculum vitae for people seeking a return to work.

Detailed information on compiling a CV is available on the Careers Service website www.careersservice.ni.com. Customers can also access information through books and leaflets held by Careers Service staff based in Jobs & Benefits Offices, JobCentres and Careers Offices.

Participants on the New Deal programme attending Core Gateway provision are provided with help to improve their job search and employability skills including compiling or updating a CV.

Participants on the Personal Development element of Training for Success will be afforded the opportunity to gain experience in various job search activities including development of a CV.

The Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS) which is available in Belfast, Londonderry and Strabane exists to help the unemployed and

economically inactive find suitable jobs. As part of that service, clients are given practical help and support in preparing and updating curricula vitae.

Returning to Employment

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the provisions in place to assist those who have given up paid employment to act as a carer to enable them to re-enter the workforce. (AQW 4290/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: A comprehensive range of provision is available through my Department's Employment Service which is delivered via the network of 35 Jobs and Benefits offices and JobCentres, and through contracted Providers, all of which is designed to help jobseekers and other benefit clients find suitable work. The services include mandatory work-focused interviews; action planning for certain clients and measures specifically designed to improve the job prospects of those in areas of high unemployment and deprivation who have severe employability barriers. The Employment Service also provides details of a substantial number of current job vacancies, not only in Northern Ireland but throughout the rest of Europe. Staff in the offices can offer jobseekers help to access suitable opportunities.

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): The main financial support mechanism for the generation of electricity from renewable sources is provided through the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) and is in the region £15million per annum.

The financial allocation available in 07/08 from the Environment and Renewable Energy Fund (EREF) for renewable energy sources is £34.125m, across 4 Departments. In addition, the Carbon Trust Loan Fund (supported through Invest NI), can support commercially viable renewable energy projects. The loan fund currently stands at £4.7million.

For companies involved in providing products or services in the renewable energy market each request for Selective Financial Assistance to Invest NI will be examined on its merits and support, if any, determined following an appraisal of the project.

Financial assistance is also available through UK wide programmes such as the Low Carbon Building Programme (for householders and community applications) and via capital grants available from the Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) for renewable technology development.

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: The amount of Government funding spent on renewable energy sources in each of the last three years is outlined below:

	05/06 (£m)	06/07 (£m)	07/08 (to date) (£m)
Environment and Renewable Energy Fund (EREF)	----	5.629	9.860
DETI	1.000	0.766	0.375
Invest NI	0.586	1.033	0.647
DARD	0.921	0.539	0.708
DFP	0.140	1.138	2.328
Total	2.647	9.105	13.918

The amount of financial assistance that is available for renewable energy sources is detailed in the response to AQW 3351/08.

East Antrim as a Tourist Destination

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the action being taken by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to promote East Antrim as a tourist destination. (AQW 3839/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board's (NITB) role is to promote and competitively position Northern Ireland as a world class tourist destination. NITB in partnership with the regional delivery bodies in the North East continue to develop and promote the Causeway Coast and Glens as a 'must see' visitor destination.

East Antrim is within the Signature Project for the Antrim and Causeway Coast Area, a strand of which is the Causeway Coast and Glens Tourism Masterplan. A key project within the Masterplan was the development of the Causeway Coastal Route, which passes through East Antrim. £410,807 has been spent on the Causeway Coastal Route in 2006/07 and 2007/08.

In addition, the area benefits from further significant funding which is allocated to the Signature Project. Since April 2005, financial assistance totalling £451,250 has been offered by NITB and Invest NI to tourism projects specifically in the East Antrim constituency.

In terms of promotion, NITB provides business and financial assistance to the Causeway Coast and Glens Regional Tourism Partnership which is tasked with marketing, product development and visitor servicing at a regional level.

During the period April 2005 to March 2008, financial assistance of £492,229 has been made available to the Causeway Coast & Glens Regional Tourism Partnership, whose remit covers the East Antrim area.

Covenanters Initiative

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what action he is taking to support the Covenanters Initiative launched by the Ulster-Scots Agency; and what action is being taken by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to work with the Ulster-Scots Agency, in developing and marketing it across Northern Ireland and Scotland.

(AQW 3846/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I understand that the Ulster Scots Agency has just established a small steering group to assess the potential to create an event based on the Covenanters Initiative. The discussions are at a very early stage and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has not yet been involved.

Should the Ulster Scots Agency decide to run an event which has capacity to attract visitors, the NITB will help promote it through their events pages on www.discovernorthernireland.com

Both the NITB and Tourism Ireland Ltd (TIL) work closely with the Ulster Scots Agency to ensure that relevant Ulster Scots elements are integrated into the key tourism themes of Heritage, Living Culture, Creative Tourism and the Arts.

NITB and TIL also provide feedback to the Agency on market research from key markets to help guide the development of any Ulster Scots events, to ensure they are presented in a way that appeals to their target audience

Bushmills Distillery

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his department's plans to mark the 400th anniversary of Bushmills Distillery. (AQW 3857/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has met representatives of Bushmills Distillery and its parent company Diageo and has advised them in relation to activity to mark the 400th anniversary of Bushmills throughout this year. NITB is jointly hosting a Bushmills 400th anniversary event at the Culloden Hotel on 27th February, which will include visiting travel media from key overseas markets.

NITB will include details of the Bushmills 400th anniversary when conducting briefings with all overseas media throughout 2008 and is in discussion with Bushmills Distillery about incorporating the 400th anniversary theme in NITB's annual Meet the Buyer event in May, which is attended by over one hundred top tour operators from around the world.

Moyle District Council has received a letter of offer under the Tourism Development Scheme for 50% of eligible project costs to a maximum of £76,752 to develop a footbridge across the river Bush in Bushmills. The bridge design incorporates images to mark the 400th anniversary of the village of Bushmills being granted a royal license to distill alcohol.

Tourist Numbers

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his department's plans to prioritise increasing the number of tourists visiting from (i) Great Britain; (ii) the Republic of Ireland; (iii) the European Union; (iv) North America; and (v) elsewhere, over the next 5 years. (AQW 3932/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
ROI market (ii)

In the context of ROI marketing, Dublin is a vital gateway to Northern Ireland and a key factor in holiday growth has been driven by those who visit via the Republic of Ireland. Previous Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) Gateway campaigns have proved extremely successful and strategies will be put in place to target more potential visitors including improved visitor servicing through information at key points of entry and targeted campaigns.

Overseas Markets (i, iii, iv, v)

Tourism Ireland (TIL) will continue to promote Northern Ireland vigorously in 22 markets overseas. Northern Ireland will feature in the full range of TIL's

global destination marketing programmes. In addition, TIL will engage in tactical marketing activity specifically to promote Northern Ireland overseas. TIL will seek to encourage greater participation in overseas marketing by the Northern Ireland industry.

The continued development of convenient, competitive and direct access services will be critical to achieving the targets TIL have set out above, for growing overseas tourism to Northern Ireland. TIL will continue to identify and exploit marketing opportunities arising from existing and additional direct, air services in Great Britain, in Mainland Europe and in North America. TIL will also continue to work with sea carriers to encourage more visitors from GB and elsewhere to take their cars to Northern Ireland.

Communication Access

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment 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 3992/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In line with its commitment to meeting the obligations of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, DETI offers the following facilities specifically designed to facilitate hard of hearing and deaf people.

(a) Textphone facilities which enable customers with hearing difficulties to contact the Department. The textphone numbers are published in all Departmental publications.

(b) Induction loop facilities which have been installed in a number of meeting and training rooms on the Department's premises. Two portable induction loop systems are available for use as required.

When organising events, officials from DETI and the Department's NDPBs are advised to check in advance with attendees whether they have any special requirements so that appropriate provision, including the use of sign language interpreters, if necessary, can be made.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of meeting requests he has received since May 2007. (AQW 4068/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has received 151 formal meeting requests since May 2007, with 17 of these coming from MLAs.

Visitors to Carrickfergus

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of visitors to Carrickfergus in each of the last 5 years; and to detail the action he is taking to increase the tourist potential of Carrickfergus Castle. (AQW 4089/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The number of visitors to Carrickfergus in each of the last 5 years (2007 figures are not yet available) is detailed in the table below. These figures include out of state and domestic visitors visiting for any reason (e.g. holiday, business, visiting friends and relatives), and staying for at least one night. It does not include day trips.

Out-of-state visitors and domestic holidaymakers to Carrickfergus Borough Council Area					
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Trips	47,800	54,100	59,100	54,600	59,300
Nights	198,500	227,400	226,700	211,900	230,200

¹Due to changes in the survey methodology relating to domestic trips, along with the decision in 2006 to adopt figures produced by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) for Republic of Ireland residents visiting Northern Ireland, the figures for 2005 and 2006 above cannot be compared to any previous year.

One of the key roles of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) is to promote and competitively position Northern Ireland as a world class destination. NITB in partnership with the regional delivery body, the Causeway Coast & Glens Regional Tourism Partnership is promoting the Causeway Coast and Glens which includes Carrickfergus as a 'must see' region within the Northern Ireland brand. Carrickfergus Castle is actively promoted online by NITB, Tourism Ireland and Causeway Coast & Glens on their websites and in national and regional publications. It also benefits through media familiarisation trips, PR and marketing initiatives.

The Department of Environment's Environment & Heritage Service (EHS) is engaged in a programme of maintenance to ensure Carrickfergus Castle's upkeep as an iconic historic monument.

EHS provides regular visitor and educational tours. It is running a programme of events from February to November which will include 'living history' demonstrations of armoury, archery and fencing, two

major fairs and tours of the Town Walls. EHS has also commissioned a DVD on the layout and history of the Castle, available in several languages and with subtitles for the hard of hearing.

NITB, Carrickfergus Borough Council and EHS liaise on the promotion and marketing of the castle and castle staff now liaise directly with coach tour operators over the provision of short visits as a first stop on tours of the Causeway Coastal Route.

NITB and partners are currently developing a 'world class' visitor interpretation and infrastructure plan for the Causeway Coast and Glens Signature Project area, primarily focused on the Causeway Coastal Route and consultants have been appointed to undertake a technical study of the top flagship attractions – including Carrickfergus Castle - along the Causeway Coastal Route. This work will provide recommendations on interpretation and infrastructural requirements and will be the nucleus of creating a world class visitor experience.

Assembly Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of written Assembly questions he has answered each month, since May 2007. (AQW 4094/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The number of written Assembly Questions answered by the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment, each month from May 2007 to January 2008, is detailed in the table below:

Month	Number Answered
May 2007	1
June 2007	33
July 2007	40
August 2007	0
September 2007	10
October 2007	60
November 2007	42
December 2007	46
January 2008	22

Land Available

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to (i) list the locations; and (ii) detail the amount of land available for commercial/ industrial use, in the district electoral areas of Crotlieve

and Mourne, in the Newry and Mourne District Council area. (AQW 4163/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Invest NI does not hold information on the land at a district electoral area level and is thus unable to comment specifically on the Crotlieve and Mourne electoral areas.

In the wider Newry and Mourne District Council area, Invest NI holds circa 100 acres of land at eight locations in Newry (c.98 acres), Hilltown (c.1 acre), Crossmaglen (c.0.5 acres) & Kilkeel (c.0.5 acres). However, all of this land has already been leased to client companies.

Through its online property database, accessible through the www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk web portal, Invest NI markets its own and private sector property solutions. Currently approximately 163,000 square feet of workspace are being advertised on this database in the Newry and Mourne Council Area.

Pomeroy Developments Project

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the conditions that are placed upon funding for the Pomeroy Developments Project. (AQW 4190/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment issued a Letter of Offer under the Peace II Programme to Pomeroy Development Projects on 28 January 2008 for assistance of £489,740 towards the construction of workspace units.

The Letter of Offer requires the project promoter to fulfil standard contractual conditions. The conditions include the appointment of a design team and contractor, ensuring full project funding is in place and that full planning permission has been obtained before construction commences and grant assistance is drawn down.

The promoter must also ensure that general conditions concerning EU publicity, liaison with project funders and the retention of documents are adhered to throughout the lifetime of the project. Additionally, the Department requires that all statutory approvals are in place, and that the newly built workspace premises are insured and fit for purpose before trading.

Eligible project expenditure on the Letter of Offer is that incurred on or before 30 June 2008.

Bushmills Distillery

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the action his department is

taking to promote Bushmills Distillery in the year of its 400th anniversary. (AQW 4328/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has met representatives of Bushmills Distillery and its parent company Diageo and has advised them in relation to activity to mark the 400th anniversary of Bushmills throughout this year. NITB is jointly hosting a Bushmills 400th anniversary event at the Culloden Hotel on 27th February, which will include visiting travel media from key overseas markets.

NITB will include details of the Bushmills 400th anniversary when conducting briefings with all overseas media throughout 2008 and is in discussion with Bushmills Distillery about incorporating the 400th anniversary theme in NITB's annual Meet the Buyer event in May, which is attended by over one hundred top tour operators from around the world.

Moyle District Council has received a letter of offer under the Tourism Development Scheme for 50% of eligible project costs to a maximum of £76,752 to develop a footbridge across the river Bush in Bushmills. The bridge design incorporates images to mark the 400th anniversary of the village of Bushmills being granted a royal license to distill alcohol.

ENVIRONMENT

Ministerial Meetings

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of meetings she has held with MLAs since May 2007. (AQW 3828/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I have held seventy one meetings with MLAs since May 2007.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment 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 3881/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have held seven meetings with district councils; two meetings with NILGA; and I have not met SOLACE formally.

Planning Applications

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications that have been approved for apartments along the Old Shore Road, Carrickfergus, in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 3906/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I regret that the Planning Service's current IT system does not record applications in sufficient detail to provide the information requested. Accurate figures for the years in question could only be provided through a manual exercise at a disproportionate cost.

Written Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of written questions received since May 2007, and the average length of time taken to publish a response.

(AQW 3975/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I received 499 written questions between May 2007 and 31 January 2008. The average length of time taken to publish a response was 7.5 days.

Planning Officer Earnings

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the average annual earnings of a senior planning officer in the Planning Service.

(AQW 3997/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The average annual salaries for senior planning officials in my Department's Planning Service, based on the 2007 pay scales, are as follows:

Grade	Average salary (£)
Senior Professional & Technical Officer (SPTO)	31,800
Principal Professional & Technical Officer (PPTO)	42,400
Grade 6 Planner	54,400

Communication Access

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment 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 4013/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My

Department has produced a "Guide to Making Information Accessible" which sets out how information provided to the public should be made available in a range of accessible formats that meet the needs of all those who wish to access its services. The Guide has issued to all staff and is available on the Department's Intranet site. It contains a section on "communicating with deaf or hard of hearing people" which sets out some practical measures for staff such as ensuring Departmental textphone numbers are included on all correspondence.

My Department has also played an active role in the British/Irish Sign Language Partnership group, which drew up best practice guidance on the provision of public services through British and Irish Sign Language.

My Department will organise sign language interpreters or speech to text operators for those people who require this aid to communication.

The Driver and Vehicle Agency has taken a number of practical steps to assist deaf and hard of hearing customers, such as:

- Installation of loop systems and associated signage within all eight Local Vehicle Licensing Offices and at the public counter of the Driver Licensing Office in Coleraine.
- Installation of an induction loop system in all Agency test centres, including theory test centres, and information scroller systems at all eight Local Vehicle Licensing Offices.
- The availability of two minicomms for both Driver and Vehicle licensing queries.
- Provision of a textphone for candidates wishing to book theory tests, driving tests or vehicle tests by telephone as well as an online facility for each of these services.
- The availability of theory tests onscreen in British Sign Language.
- The decision to allow cards with appropriate signage during the practical driving test to assist deaf and hard of hearing customers and signers to accompany candidates during practical driving tests.

These facilities are advertised through the telephone directory, yellow pages, application forms, information cards and the internet. Details on how to book a vehicle test on-line are also incorporated on the reminder forms.

Environment and Heritage Service has installed loop systems and associated signage at Carrickfergus Castle, Crawfordsburn Country Park and Peatlands Park. At Carrickfergus Castle, subtitled films will soon be available, to enhance the audio visual experience for customers with hearing disabilities.

Cist Stones

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm the financial assistance that would be available from the Historic Monuments and Buildings Branch for an interpretive panel for the Cist Stones to be exhibited at Mountstewart, Newtownards. (AQW 4075/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I am pleased to advise that my Department is prepared to provide £500 towards the cost of the production of an information panel. Part of this could be 'in kind' by providing the services of the in-house graphics unit.

Quarrying on Black Mountain

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of complaints received in relation to (i) dust; and (ii) noise, that the Environment and Heritage Service has investigated, arising from quarrying on the Black Mountain, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 4081/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Environment and Heritage Service has received no complaints in the last 5 years relating to dust arising from quarrying on the Black Mountain.

EHS has no information on noise complaints as regulation of noise from quarrying operations is the responsibility of the local council within whose area the quarry falls, in this case Belfast City Council.

Quarrying on Black Mountain

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment to indicate whether or not she will initiate discontinuance action, under Article 39 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, to close the quarry on Black Mountain. (AQW 4082/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department recognises the importance of the Belfast Hills, not only in providing a landscape setting for the north and west of the city, but also as a recreational resource of immense potential for all the people of Belfast and visitors to Northern Ireland. However, I also recognise that there are many difficulties and challenges to be overcome if this potential is to be realised – not least the fact that the area has a history of quarrying which dates back several centuries and still continues today.

Through the planning process the Department has imposed strict limits on the extent of quarrying in the area. By the use of stringent conditions my Department has sought to contain the extent of extraction and to minimise visual impact by landscaping etc.

The largest quarry in the area and most visually intrusive is Black Mountain. Through the use of conditions and discussions with the quarry owners, significant tidying-up and landscaping work has been undertaken in the past along the southern edge of the quarry, above the Upper Springfield Road. The improvements include the relocation of quarry stockpiles and waste tips, the grading and seeding of frontage embankments and the planting of trees and shrubs. As a result, a considerable visual improvement has been achieved.

The Department could initiate discontinuance action under Article 39 of the 1991 Planning Order. This is a lengthy process with no guarantee of success. Anyone on whom a notice of intention is served is entitled to a hearing before the Planning Appeals Commission, an independent appellate body.

If successful, the Department would also have to pay significant compensation to quarry owners for the closure of their businesses. This is likely to be very significant, possibly running into millions of pounds, and would have to be met from within the existing Northern Ireland allocation and ultimately by the taxpayer. My Department has not made budget provision for such compensation payments.

There is also the effect that closures would have on the local economy and employment. For example the last figures provided with planning applications indicated that Whitemountain Quarries Ltd employs around 35 local people directly and provides services mainly within the Belfast area. Recognition must also be given to the importance of maintaining jobs and services, not just through direct employment, but also indirectly through knock-on contracts and services.

There is also the question of setting a precedent. There are over 250 quarrying operations throughout the Province, all of which contribute to the economy of Northern Ireland. In making any decision, the Department would have to take account of demands for other quarries to be closed down and to justify not taking such action when it had already set a precedent.

Ulster Farm By-Products

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of occasions the Environment and Heritage Service has investigated Ulster Farm By-Products Ltd, Glenavy, in relation to (i) breaches of emission authorisation conditions; (ii) the pollution of local rivers; and (iii) the pollution of Lough Neagh; and to further detail the action taken against the company. (AQW 4110/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Since November 2005 Ulster Farm By-Products has been regulated under the Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 (PPC).

Under these regulations 24 breaches of conditions for discharges to the Glenavy River have been investigated. One case is currently with the Courts.

Prior to regulation under PPC my Department took six prosecutions against Ulster Farm By-Products under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 for offences involving pollution of Glenavy River. 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

TABLE 1: SITES TRANSFERRED TO THE NORTHERN IRELAND ADMINISTRATION SINCE 1998

Description	Transfer Date	Value of Site £m	NI Department
Crumlin Road Gaol	Aug-03	1.3	OFMDFM
Maze Prison	Apr-04	6.2	OFMDFM
Crisis Management Centre	Apr-06	0.2	OFMDFM
Malone Road Army Barracks	Mar-03	4.3	OFMDFM
Magherafelt Royal Irish Regiment Base	Mar-03	0.3	OFMDFM
Long Kesh	Mar-03	1.5	OFMDFM
Ebrington Barracks	Dec-03	4.0	OFMDFM
Girdwood Barracks	Mar-06	7.0	DSD
Clooney Army Base	Feb-05	12.8	DSD
Andersonstown Police Station	Feb-06	0.4	DSD
Fort George	Apr-04	0.1	DSD

There are no discharges from Ulster Farm By-Products to Lough Neagh controlled under the PPC Regulations or the Water (NI) Order 1999.

In relation to emissions to air, a significant number of odour complaints have been investigated under the PPC Regulations. As you are aware from previous correspondence, the substantial improvement programme undertaken by the company to address the odour problems included the appointment of independent consultants to review the operation. Their recommendations for improvement have now been received and incorporated into a programme of work.

Domestic Oil Tanks

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of domestic oil tank (i) spillages; and (ii) fires, dealt with by each of the environmental departments of the 26 district councils, in each of the last 5 years; and to further detail the cost incurred by each district council, in dealing with such incidents, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 4112/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) staff and District Council Environmental Department staff both investigate reports of pollution which have the potential to cause damage to the aquatic environment.

I am able to provide details of incidents and costs in relation to investigations by EHS staff, however, I am unable to provide details in relation to fires and incidents dealt with by the Council Environmental Department staff.

EHS staff have investigated 131 substantiated water pollution incidents involving domestic oil tanks over the 26 District Council areas over the 5 year period 1 January 2003 to 31 December 2007.

TABLE 1: SUBSTANTIATED WATER POLLUTION INCIDENTS – DOMESTIC OIL TANKS (BY YEAR)

Year	Incidents
2003	21
2004	24
2005	30
2006	22
2007*	34
Total	131

*Data for 2007 may be subject to some change as investigation reports are updated..

EHS does not record specific cost details for each incident they are called to investigate, however, average costs have been calculated to provide figures across the 26 District Council areas for the 5 year period to 31 December 2007. EHS staff costs amount to £19,961 for the 5 year period to 31 December 2007.

TABLE 2: SUBSTANTIATED WATER POLLUTION INCIDENTS – DOMESTIC OIL TANKS.

Local Council Area	Number of Incidents	Estimated Cost (£)
Antrim	13	1,980.88
Ards	6	914.25
Armagh	4	609.50
Ballymena	6	914.25
Ballymoney	4	609.50

Local Council Area	Number of Incidents	Estimated Cost (£)
Banbridge	7	1,066.62
Belfast	3	457.13
Carrick	5	761.87
Castlereagh	1	152.37
Coleraine	6	914.25
Cookstown	5	761.88
Craigavon	3	457.13
Derry	7	1,066.63
Down	2	304.75
Dungannon	2	304.75
Fermanagh	12	1,828.50
Larne	3	457.13
Limavady	1	152.38
Lisburn	8	1,219.00
Magherafelt	1	152.38
Moyle	3	457.13
N'Abbey	5	761.87
Newry & Mourne	2	304.75
North Down	1	152.38
Omagh	17	2,590.38
Strabane	4	609.50
Total	131	19,961.16

Use of Lead Shot

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any plans to restrict the use of lead shot around the sea coast; and to confirm whether or not such a restriction would also apply to inland waterways. (AQW 4226/08)

The Minister of the Environment: We are examining how best to restrict the use of lead shot over wetlands, including the foreshore and inland waters. I expect to bring forward proposals by the summer.

Waste Incinerator Plant

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4047/08, to outline planning policy in relation to the siting of a chicken waste incinerator plant in an area of High Scenic Value. (AQW 4394/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Policy in relation to development in Areas of High Scenic Value is set out in Policy COU7 contained in the draft

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) 2015. Specifically it states that “planning permission will not be granted to development proposals that would adversely affect the quality, character and features of interest in Areas of High Scenic Value. Proposals for mineral working and waste disposal will not be acceptable. A Landscape Analysis must accompany development proposals in these areas to indicate the likely effects of the proposal on the landscape.”

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Value of Assets

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total value of additional assets transferred from reserved departments to the Executive since the formation of the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998; and to detail (i) the value of each site transferred; and (ii) the date each transfer was agreed. (AQW 3571/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): Although the question specifies “reserved departments”, it has been assumed that it is referring to the transfer of assets to the 11 Departments of the Northern Ireland Administration, from other UK Government Departments.

Information provided by Northern Ireland Departments indicates that since 1998, eleven sites have been transferred to the Departments of the Northern Ireland Administration as set out in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1: SITES TRANSFERRED TO THE NORTHERN IRELAND ADMINISTRATION SINCE 1998

Description	Transfer Date	Value of Site £m	NI Department
Crumlin Road Gaol	Aug-03	1.3	OFMDFM
Maze Prison	Apr-04	6.2	OFMDFM
Crisis Management Centre	Apr-06	0.2	OFMDFM
Malone Road Army Barracks	Mar-03	4.3	OFMDFM
Magherafelt Royal Irish Regiment Base	Mar-03	0.3	OFMDFM
Long Kesh	Mar-03	1.5	OFMDFM
Ebrington Barracks	Dec-03	4.0	OFMDFM
Girdwood Barracks	Mar-06	7.0	DSD
Clooney Army Base	Feb-05	12.8	DSD
Andersonstown Police Station	Feb-06	0.4	DSD
Fort George	Apr-04	0.1	DSD

Ministerial Meetings

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of meetings he has held with Member of the Legislative Assembly since May 2007. (AQW 3737/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have had 42 separate meetings with Members of the Legislative Assembly relating to my Departmental responsibilities as Minister for Finance and Personnel. In total 56 Members attended these meetings.

Rate Payment

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in the context of ensuring that the appropriate contributions are being made, to outline the action he is taking to ensure that properties for which no rates are being paid are vacant.[R] (AQW 3821/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Land and Property Services identifies vacant properties and determines liability for rates through -

- Data-sharing with other Government bodies and district councils.
- Data-matching with Northern Ireland Electricity.
- Issuing occupancy enquiry letters as part of normal daily business.
- Carrying out physical inspections.

The Agency has been developing partnerships with Northern Ireland Electricity and district councils to share information to assist in determining rate liability and to reduce the volume of physical inspections needed.

The Agency continues to carry out physical inspections where it is considered necessary. As a result of reform pressures and work to advance a new IT system, a lower number of physical inspections have been undertaken over the last two years by the Agency itself. However, it has been developing partnerships with a number of district councils to undertake some of these inspections on behalf of Land and Property Services.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel 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 3883/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In my capacity as Minister for Finance and Personnel I have met with (i) delegations representing one or more of the district councils on five occasions, and (ii) the

Northern Ireland Local Government Association once, since May 2007. I have not met with (iii) the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, during this period.

Sick Leave

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the estimated cost to the public purse of sick leave in each Government department, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3938/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Given the similar nature of these questions, I have addressed both in this joint answer.

The details requested in AQW 3938/08 and AQW 3946/08 are set out in the attached tables. They include the total number of days absence, the average number of days lost per staff member, in each of the last 5 years and the total cost. The overall figures presented include NI Government departments, Executive Agencies and NDPBs (where such information is available).

SICKNESS ABSENCE IN LAST 5 FINANCIAL YEARS 2006/07 ABSENCE RATES BY DEPARTMENT

	Total no of days absence	Ave no. of days lost per staff member	Total Cost (£)
DARD	30,276.8	11.1	2,502,520
DCAL	4,438.8	10.5	478,667
DE	7,949.4	12.2	700,995
DETI	6,793.8	10.0	629,878
DFP	35,682.5	12.4	3,048,089
DEL	24,035.1	14.5	2,010,388
DHSSPS	10,997.4	11.4	1,161,752
DOE	31,379.2	11.5	2,766,018
DRD	26,531.3	9.2	2,558,020
DSD	140,778.1	18.7	9,374,199
OFMDFM	3,629.8	10.7	400,756
Total*	322,640.3	13.7	25,649,986

*Please note that a small number of staff (20.5 staff in post) are not coded to an individual department but are included in the overall total.

2005/06 ABSENCE RATES BY DEPARTMENT

	Total no of days absence	Ave no. of days lost per staff member	Total Cost (£)
DARD	38,484.8	11.1	3,169,466
DCAL	4,439.8	10.3	492,580
DE	8,634.0	12.9	710,132
DETI	7,578.0	10.7	668,496

	Total no of days absence	Ave no. of days lost per staff member	Total Cost (£)
DFP	37,388.5	13.0	2,973,683
DEL	23,409.0	14.0	1,818,003
DHSSPS	10,613.0	10.7	1,127,687
DOE	28,788.1	11.1	2,511,703
DRD	25,110.4	8.2	2,416,376
DSD	140,572.3	18.3	9,164,223
OFMDFM	3,123.1	8.6	307,706
Total	328,141.0	13.4	25,360,055

2004/05 ABSENCE RATES BY DEPARTMENT

	Total no of days absence	Ave no. of days lost per staff member	Total Cost (£)
DARD	40,273.3	11.5	3,033,434
DCAL	4,653.7	11.0	434,989
DE	8,274.7	12.8	716,665
DETI	7,090.8	9.9	570,762
DFP	39,831.3	13.7	2,990,330
DEL	24,610.1	14.7	1,760,015
DHSSPS	9,584.9	9.5	948,547
DOE	29,241.7	12.0	2,470,560
DRD	32,285.3	10.2	2,877,604
DSD	152,260.4	19.4	9,212,062
OFMDFM	3,314.9	8.6	326,737
Total	351,421.0	14.2	25,341,703

2003/04 ABSENCE RATES BY DEPARTMENT

	Total no of days absence	Ave no. of days lost per staff member	Total Cost (£)
DARD	40,428.5	12.4	3,076,221
DCAL	6,464.4	15.1	594,459
DE	6,984.9	11.7	530,094
DETI	8,218.2	11.8	639,922
DFP	40,020.6	14.3	2,837,135
DEL	28,413.8	17.7	2,117,164
DHSSPS	12,128.9	12.3	1,127,489
DOE	29,216.4	13.4	2,291,734
DRD	37,036.9	12.0	3,125,789
DSD	159,088.4	19.7	9,414,774
OFMDFM	4,815.5	12.6	355,725

	Total no of days absence	Ave no. of days lost per staff member	Total Cost (£)
Total	372,816.7	15.5	26,110,505

2002/03 ABSENCE RATES BY DEPARTMENT

	Total no of days absence	Ave no. of days lost per staff member	Total Cost (£)
DARD	41,667.9	13.4	3,174,979
DCAL	5,481.5	13.8	538,402
DE	7,097.1	12.5	541,145
DETI	8,633.6	12.7	734,282
DFP	36,150.3	13.6	2,620,363
DEL	28,374.4	18.7	1,975,050
DHSSPS	12,637.8	13.2	1,116,699
DOE	28,616.6	14.5	2,106,627
DRD	30,792.7	10.7	2,531,747
DSD	152,501.0	19.1	8,595,556
OFMDFM	4,623.2	12.2	376,952
Total	356,576.1	15.4	24,311,804

Sick Leave

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the total number of days; (ii) the average number of days per member of staff, in relation to sick leave taken in each Government department, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3946/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Given the similar nature of these questions, I have addressed both in this joint answer.

The details requested in AQW 3938/08 and AQW 3946/08 are set out in the attached tables. They include the total number of days absence, the average number of days lost per staff member, in each of the last 5 years and the total cost. The overall figures presented include NI Government departments, Executive Agencies and NDPBs (where such information is available).

**SICKNESS ABSENCE IN LAST 5 FINANCIAL YEARS
2006/07 ABSENCE RATES BY DEPARTMENT**

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HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Consultant Neurologists

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3059/08, to confirm whether or not (i) the 6 consultant neurologists in training will replace existing consultant neurologists who are retiring, and will not increase the current total; and (ii) there is a guarantee that the 6 consultant neurologists in training will remain in Northern Ireland. (AQW 3833/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The current numbers in specialty training in neurology will both replace anticipated retirements over the next 5-6 years and be available to increase the overall number of consultants.

No assurances can be given that current trainees will take up local consultant posts as this will depend on posts available on completion of training and their personal preference.

Mental-Health Services

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment he has made in relation to the future of mental health services in the Downpatrick area. (AQW 3848/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In line with the recommendations of the Bamford Review, the following nine points are the key features for the future development of Mental Health Services within the South Eastern Trust area, with specific reference to the Down Sector. The Trust will:

1.	Continue its commitment to care and treatment of the Mentally ill – further focusing hospital care on those whose needs can not realistically be met elsewhere.
2.	Strengthen Community Services through the development of a range of person-centred treatment and care options which are close to home, in the least restrictive environments.
3.	Further develop Rapid Response Services to urgent referrals – with these services being available on a 24 / 7 / 365 day basis.

4.	Ensure that no patient will be waiting longer than six weeks to be seen, assessed and placed on a Treatment Programme.
5.	Responsive Acute in-patient and Dementia services available within the New Downe Hospital for the Down Sector population.
6.	Site specialist Intensive and Continuing Care patients Hospital provision in Knockbracken Healthcare Centre, in keeping with the Commissioning Intent of the EHSSB.
7.	Develop a range of Supported Housing and Hostel Accommodation across the Down Sector for those who do not require Hospital care, but, who need ongoing support and intervention from Mental Health Services.
8.	Develop a range of Day Services and activities in partnership with Users, Carers, Voluntary Groups and communities.
9.	Participate in the Regional and Board review of the Commissioning and Provision of Addictions Services. The ex-patients Group will be actively involved in this process.

Consultant Neurologists

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3059/08, to confirm that an actual increase in the numbers of consultant neurologists will only be met by investing in further training for new neurologists, in line with the previous departmental review of adult neurology services. (AQW 3850/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are currently 13 consultant neurologists in post with six doctors in training.

The number in training is consistent with a consultant body of 16, in the period 2012 to 2014. Any investment in specialist training at this point would not achieve this number at an earlier date.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety 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 3884/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can advise that from taking up office on 8 May 2007 I have met with:

- Newry and Mourne District Council on 5 September 2007, Down District Council on 30 January 2008. A meeting with a delegation from Omagh district council is scheduled for February 20 2008.
- NILGA once on 29/01/08, a further meeting is to be scheduled in the coming weeks.
- No meetings have taken place to date with SOLACE.

Research Investment

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of money invested by his department in research, in each of the last 3 years; and what his assessment is of the profitable returns that will accrue from this investment. (AQW 3893/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below details the research expenditure committed by DHSSPS in the last three years from April 2004 to March 2007.

2004/05	£10,535,159
2005/06	£12,128,574
2006/07	£11,445,682
Total	£34,109,415

Source: Research and Development Office, Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Central Services Agency

Health and Social Care (HSC) Research is primarily about improving health and wellbeing. There is however the potential that investment in HSC research can be accompanied by increasing wealth. That is why we work with other departments such as DETI and welcome joint initiatives such as HSC Innovations launched last October which will help harness the research strengths in Northern Ireland and bring knowledge based health research through to commercial viability. Those research strengths have in the last 18 months brought in over £12 million of additional research funding for HSC R&D into Northern Ireland from external funders including the Medical Research Council, Economic and Social Research Council, Wellcome Trust and other research charities. This external funding brings new high value jobs and new buildings to Northern Ireland and the potential to encourage yet more external investment in HSC R&D.

Hospital Infections

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the reasons why the target for the reduction of hospital infections has been set at 20%, in contrast to the reduction target of 30% that has been set in Great Britain. (AQW 3925/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 11 September 2007 I announced that, for the first time, targets on reducing two particular healthcare-associated infections (HCAIs) were being put in place in Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland. The first of the new targets will require a drop of 10% in the numbers of people in hospital with *Staphylococcus aureus* bloodstream infections, including MRSA. For *Clostridium difficile*

I am seeking a reduction of 20% in hospital patients aged 65 and over. Both of these reductions are to be achieved by March 2009, using 2006/07 as the baseline year against which progress will be measured.

The target set in the NHS Operating Framework for 2008/09 is for a 30% national reduction in *C. difficile* infections to be achieved by 2011, not by March 2009 as is the case with the targets which I have set for Northern Ireland, and uses 2007/08 as the baseline year.

Northern Ireland has a lower HCAI prevalence rate than England and Wales. The targets that I have set are achievable, challenging, and right for Northern Ireland.

Substance Abuse

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients treated as a result of (i) aerosol; and (ii) substance abuse, in each of the last 3 years, broken down by (a) age group; (b) gender; and (c) Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 3927/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of individuals who have been treated for aerosol abuse is not available. However, information is available from the Northern Ireland Drug Misuse Database (DMD) on the number of individuals who have been treated for solvent abuse: solvents include aerosols, as well as gas fuels, adhesives and glues, and other products such as paint thinners and strippers and dry cleaning fluids. The tables below show the number of problem drug users who presented to treatment services and gave their consent for their details to be held on the database, with solvents as their main problem drug.

(A) BY AGE GROUP

	Under 18 years	18-21 years	22-25 years	26-29 years	30-39 years	40 years & over	Total
2004/05	21	9	2	0	0	2	34
2005/06	21	4	1	1	3	0	30
2006/07	6	1	1	0	2	1	11

(B) BY GENDER

	Male	Female	Total
2004/05	19	15	34
2005/06	23	7	30
2006/07	10	1	11

(C) BY HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE TRUST AREA

	Belfast	Northern	Southern	South Eastern	Western	Prison	Total
2004/05	16	2	1	2	8	5	34
2005/06	15	4	0	1	3	7	30
2006/07	7	2	0	1	0	1	11

Information on the number of individuals who have been treated for substance misuse is not available. However, information is available from the DMD on the number of problem drug users presenting for treatment. Drugs are defined as any drug, whether prescribed or not, including solvents and tranquillisers but excluding alcohol and tobacco. The next three tables below show information from the DMD.

(A) BY AGE GROUP

	Under 18 years	18-21 years	22-25 years	26-29 years	30-39 years	40 years & over	Total
2004/05	285	283	284	210	423	260	1,746 ⁽¹⁾
2005/06	314	306	223	210	355	258	1,666
2006/07	165	264	193	219	379	244	1,464

⁽¹⁾ This figure includes one individual whose date of birth was not recorded.

(B) BY GENDER

	Male	Female	Total
2004/05	1,320	426	1,746
2005/06	1,202	464	1,666
2006/07	1,125	339	1,464

(C) BY HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE TRUST AREA

	Belfast	Northern	Southern	South Eastern	Western	Prison	Total
2004/05	627	255	145	185	386	148	1,746
2005/06	736	153	136	172	307	162	1,666
2006/07	627	176	132	117	334	78	1,464

In addition to this information, a Census of Drug and Alcohol Treatment Services in Northern Ireland was conducted on the 1st March 2005 and 1st March 2007, collecting information on the number of individuals receiving treatment on these two days for drug only, alcohol only, or drug and alcohol misuse.

(A) BY AGE GROUP

	Under 18 years	18 years & over	Total
1st March 2005	271	4,793	5,064
1st March 2007	847	4,736	5,583

(B) BY GENDER

	Male	Female	Total
1st March 2005	3,292	1,772	5,064
1st March 2007	3,686	1,897	5,583

(C) BY HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE TRUST AREA

	Belfast	Northern	Southern	South Eastern	Western	Prison	HIS ⁽²⁾	Total
1st March 2005	1,079	1,108	863	675	921	186	232	5,064
1st March 2007	1,035	1,382	1,320	589	859	257	141	5,583

⁽²⁾ Hospital Inpatient System (HIS) processes information relating to inpatient stays in hospital. It records details of the patient's primary diagnosis and up to six secondary diagnoses. The ICD 10 codes F10 to F19 have been used to identify mental and behavioural disorders due to substances use.

Proposed Pay Bands

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of staff (i) who have received confirmation of their new proposed pay bands; (ii) who are still to be informed of their new proposed pay bands; and (iii) who have appealed their proposed new pay bands, under Agenda for Change, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 3965/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: At this point in the implementation process in the Belfast HSC Trust – (i) 16,208 staff have received confirmation of their new proposed pay bands, (ii) 5,023 staff are still to be informed of their new proposed pay bands, and (iii) 1,739 staff have asked to have their proposed new pay banding reviewed. Details for the four other Trusts are as follows: Northern HSC Trust - (i) 10,468, (ii) 2,374, and (iii) 1,333. Southern HSC Trust - (i) 9,016, (ii) 2,351, and (iii) 816. South Eastern HSC Trust - (i) 7,656, (ii) 2,929, and (iii) 933. Western HSC Trust - (i) 8,466 (ii) 4,278, and (iii) 386.

Music Therapy

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the research funding that will be made available in order to assess the benefits of music therapy for children and young people with special educational needs and mental health problems. (AQW 3966/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Funding for research is allocated on the basis of research proposals meeting specified criteria assessed by the Research and Development office. Currently the Research and Development office have no potential research projects into the benefits of Music Therapy for children and young people with special educational needs and mental health problems. My officials are currently working with the Research and Development office to identify future programmes for commissioned research. These are likely to include mental health related research; however, at this point it would not be possible to predict if any will include music therapy.

Faith-Based Youth Groups

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the funding that will be made available for faith-based youth groups that work with young people in the areas of mental health and suicide prevention. (AQW 3967/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In 2007/08 £600k was made available to Health and Social Services Boards and the Health Promotion Agency to implement the Promoting Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan.

£1.8m has also been allocated this financial year to support local communities with the development of initiatives to tackle the high rates of suicide and self harm across NI. All voluntary and community based organisation including faith-based youth groups, are eligible to apply for this funding.

Funding arrangement for 2008/09 are currently being finalised, however it is anticipated there will not be any decrease in spend in these important areas of work.

Proposed Pay Bands

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of staff whose new proposed pay band, under Agenda for Change, will lead to a reduction in their current level of pay; and (ii) the number of staff who could be

subject to a claw back of money overpaid to them, for each Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 3968/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: At this point in the process in the Belfast HSC Trust – (i) 155 staff will have a reduction in their current level of pay on moving to Agenda for Change pay bands, and (ii) 182 staff will be subject to a claw back of money overpaid to them. Similar details for the other four HSC Trusts are as follows: Northern HSC Trust - (i) 35 and (ii) 35. Southern HSC Trust - (i) 65 and (ii) 124. South Eastern HSC Trust - (i) 58 and (ii) 125. Western HSC Trust - (i) 23 and (ii) 52.

Attacks on Staff

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (i) accident and emergency staff; and (ii) emergency ambulance staff, who have been attacked at work, in the past three years, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 3969/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below details the recorded number of Accident & Emergency staff and ambulance personnel who have been physically attacked at work in the past three years.

Organisation	Number of staff
Belfast HSC Trust	111
Northern HSC Trust	43
Southern HSC Trust	30
Western HSC Trust	61
South Eastern HSC Trust	64
NI Ambulance Service	167

Occupational Therapists

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking (i) to address the shortage of occupational therapists in North Belfast; and (ii) to ensure that services are available on an equal and equitable basis. (AQW 3973/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The recruitment of staff is a matter for individual Health and Social Care Trusts taking into account factors such as service needs and available resources. Nevertheless I have been advised that a recruitment process is underway in the Belfast Trust to address current vacant Occupational Therapy posts

in the North and West Belfast locality. As an interim measure, locum staff are also being used on a temporary basis.

A target has been set to ensure by March 2008, no patient waits longer than 26 weeks from referral to commencement of treatment in Allied Health Profession services including Occupational Therapy. Excellent progress is being made towards this target and I am confident it will be achieved.

'I Can' Early Years Centre

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the current position with respect to funding for the 'I Can' Early Years Centre at Ballynahinch Primary School. (AQW 3995/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The I Can Early Years Centre was funded in 2007/2008 jointly by the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. Both are now engaged in high level discussions regarding funding for I CAN for the 2008/09 financial year.

Recurrent funding for one Speech and Language Therapist has been secured for the I Can Early Years Centre in Ballynahinch Primary School for 2008/09 from the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

Communication Access

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety 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 4014/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has a number of measures in place to assist service delivery to customers who are deaf or are hard of hearing:

(i) a text phone facility is available for customers who wish to make telephone contact with the Department. This facility will be advertised on the Departmental website.

(ii) clear visual information about the Department's services is posted on the Departmental internet website and consultation documents and other material is available at public libraries and other public bodies. The Department also provides Deaf Alerters for the use of any staff or visitors with hearing difficulties.

Deaf Alerters are linked to the fire alarm system to provide information about possible emergencies in Castle Buildings;

(iii) the Department routinely provides the Royal National Institute for Deaf People with copies of all its public consultation material. In addition, in 2005 the Department ran a deaf awareness-training programme for approximately 20 staff, to support them in working with a profoundly deaf colleague. Two members of staff have also been provided with dedicated textphones and, where staff have a requirement, the Department will provide induction couplers for use on telephone handsets.

Particular needs are identified through the recruitment process when staff are being appointed to the Department and also through health and safety assessments on the job.

Termination of Pregnancy

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the guidance given to employees of his department in relation to the law on termination of pregnancy. (AQW 4030/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 25 August 2005, as part of the process to determine the adequacy of termination of pregnancy services in Northern Ireland, my Department sent a questionnaire to the Chief Executives of Health and Social Services Trusts, GPs, Gynaecological Nurses, Obstetricians and Midwives. The covering letter which accompanied the questionnaire set out in clear terms the legal position in NI as it relates to the termination of pregnancy.

My Department is currently developing guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy in Northern Ireland. Draft guidelines were issued to interested parties for comment in January 2007. In October 2007, I set up a Departmental group to consider the responses to the draft guidance. The group will ensure that the guidelines are; set within the confines of the NI Law and clarify the existing law in Northern Ireland; are quality assured and set a benchmark on clinical and good practice guidance for health professionals.

I would like to re-iterate that there are no plans to amend the law regarding the termination of pregnancy as it stands in Northern Ireland.

Counselling Provision

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the counselling provision made available to (i) women considering a termination of pregnancy; (ii) women who have decided to have a termination of pregnancy; and (iii)

women who have had a termination of pregnancy.
(AQW 4032/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is the responsibility of Boards and Trusts to ensure that there is provision of counselling services for women who (i) are considering a termination of pregnancy; (ii) have decided to have a termination of pregnancy; and (iii) who have had a termination of pregnancy.

Staff Turnover

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the policies in place across the Health and Social Services Boards to reduce staff turnover. (AQW 4033/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The management of staffing issues, including staff turnover, is a matter for the Health and Social Services Boards.

However I am aware that the Health and Social Services Boards have a range of employee friendly policies in place to support employees at work, enabling them to continue working and thereby aiming to reduce staff turnover. These include flexible working arrangements, term time working, carer's leave, and job share opportunities.

Consultant Locums

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the quantum used to pay for consultant locums across the Health and Social Services Boards. (AQW 4034/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In 2006/07 financial year the total costs for employing consultant locums in the four Health and Social Services Boards was £15,893,810.

From the 1 April 2007 to 31 January 2008 the total cost for employing consultant locums was £10,786,328.

Wind Turbine

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the income generated by the wind turbine located at Antrim Area Hospital; and (ii) the total savings resulting for the hospital by using wind energy. (AQW 4035/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: (i) The income generated by the wind turbine located at Antrim Area Hospital from February 2005 to January 2008 is some £56k

(ii) The total savings resulting for the hospital by using wind energy from February 2005 to January 2008 is some £186k with an associated saving of 1084.39 tonnes of Carbon Dioxide.

Meeting Requests

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of meeting requests he has received since May 2007. (AQW 4067/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can advise that from taking up office on 8 May 2007 I have received:

607 meeting requests during the period of 8 May to 31 December 2007 and 114 meeting requests since 1 January 2008. Giving a total to date of 721 meeting requests received during 2007/08.

Satellite Cancer Centre

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the progress made in discussions with his Ministerial counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, in developing a satellite cancer centre in the North West, since the last North-South Ministerial meeting. (AQW 4072/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 15 January 2008, I made a statement to the Assembly regarding the North South Ministerial Council Health and Food Safety Sectoral meeting held in Dublin on 28 November 2007. At that meeting I discussed the issue of radiotherapy services in the northwest with the Minister for Health and Children and we agreed that our respective departments should assess the potential for further cooperation in that speciality.

My Department has asked service commissioners to take forward the development of a business case for an increase in radiotherapy provision in Northern Ireland that would ensure sufficient capacity to meet demand from 2015.

An initial assessment of projected cancer incidence conducted by the Department suggests that a combination of radiotherapy services in Belfast and a satellite radiotherapy centre in Altnagelvin would best meet the needs of the Northern Ireland population beyond 2015. The business case process will be informed by the Department's ongoing discussions with the Department of Health and Children on this issue. Specialist tertiary cancer services will continue to be provided at the Cancer Centre in Belfast.

Multiple Sclerosis Sufferers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of money allocated for multiple sclerosis sufferers in the Budget for the year 2008-2009. (AQW 4074/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The 2008-09 budget allocation does not specifically earmark funding for people with multiple sclerosis (MS). The budget does however include additional funding for a number of service developments which are likely to benefit people with MS. These include £9.28 million to improve access to specialist drugs, including the introduction of the disease modifying drug Tysabri in line with NICE recommendations and sustaining a maximum waiting time of 13 weeks for other disease modifying therapies for MS; and £1 million to reduce waiting times for specialised wheelchairs and provide additional respite care for people with physical and sensory disabilities.

Taxis Spending

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of money spent on taxis by the Ulster Hospital, to transport medical records to other hospitals. (AQW 4088/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The cost of taxis for the Ulster Hospital medical records department for 2006/07 was £55.

Funding Allocation

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, further to comments made by the junior Minister to the Assembly on 12 February 2008, to confirm the allocation of £2.5 million to twenty organisations in the 2007/08 financial year; and to provide details of this funding allocation. (AQW 4129/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below shows the allocation of core and project funding to disability organisations from the Mental Health and Disability Policy Directorate in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which totals approximately £2.5 million, as referred to by the junior Minister on 12 February 2008, during a debate on the bullying of disabled children.

Organisation	Core Funding	Project Funding
British Epilepsy Association	11,549	Nil

Organisation	Core Funding	Project Funding
Council for Advancement for Communication for Deaf People (CACDP)	19,625	Nil
Crossroads	54,802	Nil
Institute for Counselling and Personal Development	13,184	Nil
Autism NI	48,721	17,498
Royal National Institute for the Deaf	28,025	Nil
Blind Centre Northern Ireland	74,901	Nil
Disability Action	157,194	Nil
MENCAP	104,840	Nil
Mucopolysaccharide	3,763	Nil
NI Music Therapy Trust	16,250	Nil
Speechmatters	13,749	
The Cedar Foundation	42,997	30,781
Contact a Family	29,604	Nil
Down's Syndrome Association	33,357	Nil
Sense	23,831	Nil
The Child Brain Injury Trust		53,993
National Deaf Children's Society		55,330
Whizzkidz		32,973
Family Fund	1,651,000	Nil
Total	2,327,392	190,575

Out-of-Hours Services

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the benchmarking exercise that is currently taking place into the performance of all out-of-hours services, to detail (i) by whom the benchmarking exercise is being undertaken; (ii) the start date of the exercise; (iii) the timescale within which the exercise will be completed; and (iv) the objectives of the exercise. (AQW 4162/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The GP out-of-hours benchmarking exercise is being undertaken by the Primary Care Foundation, an independent charity working to improve the quality of healthcare across the UK and beyond. The benchmarking exercise began in November 2007 and is due to be completed by May 2008. The objective of the exercise is to assist in the process of determining how best to meet urgent patient out-of-hours healthcare needs in line with best practice.

Out-of-Hours Services

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (i) calls made to Strabane out-of-hours service seeking advice; (ii) patients seen at Strabane out-of-hours service; (iii) home visits that resulted from calls to Strabane out-of-hours service; and (iv) people who were redirected to other facilities in Omagh or Derry/Londonderry after an initial call to Strabane out-of-hours service, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4166/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below details the breakdown of calls made to the Strabane Out of Hours service in each of the last 3 years.

	Telephone Advice	Attended Centre	Home Visits	Total
Jan – Dec 2005	7,245 (49%)	6,957 (47%)	563 (4%)	14,765
Jan – Dec 2006	7,378 (50%)	6,918 (46%)	528 (4%)	14,824
Jan – Dec 2007	7,415 (50%)	6,867 (46%)	528 (4%)	14,810

The number of patients who were subsequently re-directed to services in Londonderry/Derry and Omagh during the period January – December 2007 is as follows:

	Londonderry/Derry	Omagh
Jan – Dec 2007	2,477	50

Information for 2005 & 2006 regarding patients who were re-directed to Londonderry/Derry and Omagh is not readily available as an older version of the computer system was in place in these years.

Appleby Trust

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to maintain funding for leader programmes such as the Appleby Trust in Armagh City. (AQW 4232/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust have recently been successful in securing a bid of £38,000 for the Appleby Trust and this is currently being processed. Bids for funding are required to be made on an annual basis by a Health and Social Care Trust to the relevant Health and Social Services Board and it is therefore not appropriate for me to comment on any plans to maintain this funding.

Primary Care Provision

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the provision of primary care in the community in Keady. (AQW 4280/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Primary care services in Keady are currently provided through 2 GP practices, with 6 GPs. There are also 2 Pharmacies and a Dental and an Optometrist practice in the Keady area. A wide range of primary and community care services are provided for the people of Keady by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, including services from community nurses and allied health professionals.

The Southern Health and Social Services Board has included a proposal to build a new Health and Care Centre in Keady as a priority in their Primary and Community Care Infrastructure business case. To date, the Trust has not been able to secure the purchase of a suitable development site in the Keady area, but the Department is working closely with the Southern Trust to secure the necessary business case approval and, subject to that approval, will seek to identify funding to secure a site in Keady for the future development of a new Health and Care Centre at the earliest opportunity in line with the Trust's ongoing priorities.

Age-Related Macular Degeneration

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (i) what treatment is available to Age Related Macular Degeneration patients, either wet or dry, where only one eye is affected; and (ii) a timescale within which free treatment will be made available to all patients with Age Related Macular Degeneration. (AQW 4296/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is no medical treatment currently available to cure dry age-related macular degeneration (AMD). Patients may be offered optical aids, counselling and social support as appropriate.

For patients with wet AMD, specialised treatments are available: argon laser and photodynamic therapy. Patients who are clinically suitable for treatment are treated at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence is currently appraising two anti-VEGF drugs 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.

The decision on whether to fund a particular treatment 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 wet AMD, consistent with the emerging evidence base for the treatment of this condition.

Decisions on the timescale, 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.

Excess Payments

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether or not he will consider reversing the decision to recoup excess payments to Health Service staff following the implementation of the Agenda for Change agreement. (AQW 4331/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: HSC employers are required under the Government Accounting Northern Ireland guidance to seek to recoup any excess payment from public funding including those arising following the implementation of the Agenda for Change Agreement. This guidance is drawn up by the Department of Finance and Personnel and applies to all Departments and Public Bodies.

Agenda for Change Pay System

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline why staff in the Health Service in Northern Ireland are not being afforded the pay protection offered in other parts of the United Kingdom, following the assimilation of the Agenda for Change pay system. (AQW 4332/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: HSC staff are being afforded pay protection as set out in the Agenda for Change Agreement. Under this Agreement Agenda for Change rates are paid to staff from 1 October 2004 and pay is protected at the 1 April 2005 rate.

X-Ray Facilities

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to extend access to x-ray facilities during weekends, at the Ards Hospital Minor Injuries Unit. (AQW 4337/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: X-ray facilities at Ards Minor Injuries Unit are provided from 9.00-17.00 Monday to Friday. When the facility is not available, patients requiring an x-ray are transferred to the Ulster Hospital, Dundonald, located five miles from Ards Hospital. The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has advised that there are no current plans to extend the x-ray cover to include weekends.

Agenda for Change

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not the full implementation of the Agenda for Change arrangements will be achievable by the target date of 31 March 2008. (AQW 4385/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 20 February 2008 I advised the Health Committee that, following representation from Regional Staff Side Secretaries, I had agreed to extend the deadline for all staff to be on Agenda for Change rates to 30 June 2008. I expect all Health and Social Care employers to work to this revised deadline.

Agenda for Change

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his department's policy in relation to pay protection for staff, who were employed post-October 2004, and who were not matched through the Agenda for Change process until after taking up their post. (AQW 4386/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Where pay protection is required staff appointed after 1 October 2004, and before their job was matched to an Agenda for Change pay band, will have their salary protected at the rate paid to them when their employment began.

Agenda for Change

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his department's policy in relation to pay protection for staff whose salary was higher, prior to matching and assimilation through the Agenda for Change process. (AQW 4387/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Pay protection arrangements for Health and Social Care staff moving to the new rates of pay are clearly set out in the Agenda for Change Agreement. Under these arrangements the new rates are paid to staff in post from 1 October 2004 and where the existing salary is higher than the new Agenda for Change rate pay protection will apply.

Agenda for Change

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his department's policy in relation to payment variances for those staff who have been matched after the October 2004 deadline, through Agenda for Change, but who continue to be paid at the rate prior to this process. (AQW 4389/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: All staff will be given the benefit of the new Agenda for Change rates of pay from 1 October 2004. Any variance in the rates of pay between 1 October 2004 and the actual date that staff are moved to the new rate will be taken into account in the assimilation process. This policy will be applied regardless of the date on which the individual is moved to the new rates.

Agenda for Change

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (i) the percentage of staff; and (ii) the staff groupings, in each Health and Social Care Trust area, that remain to be matched and assimilated to new pay bands within the Agenda for Change process. (AQW 4390/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The specific information requested is not held. However, from my Department's monitoring of the implementation process I can report that all jobs in the Health and Social Care Trusts have been considered by an Agenda for Change matching panel. In the Belfast HSC Trust 23% of the Agenda for Change workforce have yet to be moved to the new pay bands. Details for the other Trusts are as follows: Northern HSC Trust – 16%, Southern HSC Trust – 21%, South Eastern HSC Trust – 26%, and Western HSC Trust – 20%.

Craigavon Maternity Unit

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of births in the last 12 months; and (ii) the number of

births that can be accommodated annually, at the Craigavon Maternity Unit. (AQW 4398/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of births in the last 12 months at the Down Midwife-led Maternity Unit, the Craigavon Maternity Unit, the Ulster Maternity Unit, the Mater Maternity Unit and the Royal Victoria Maternity Unit are given in the table below.

Hospital	Number of Births in 2007
Down Maternity Unit*	0
Craigavon	3,708
Ulster	2,950
Mater	1,174
Royal Victoria	5,482

*Downe Maternity Unit closed from 2003/2004

Information on the number of births that can be accommodated annually at each of these Units is not available centrally.

Ulster Maternity Unit

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of births in the last 12 months; and (ii) the number of births that can be accommodated annually, at the Ulster Maternity Unit. (AQW 4399/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of births in the last 12 months at the Down Midwife-led Maternity Unit, the Craigavon Maternity Unit, the Ulster Maternity Unit, the Mater Maternity Unit and the Royal Victoria Maternity Unit are given in the table below.

Hospital	Number of Births in 2007
Down Maternity Unit*	0
Craigavon	3,708
Ulster	2,950
Mater	1,174
Royal Victoria	5,482

* Downe Maternity Unit closed from 2003/2004

Information on the number of births that can be accommodated annually at each of these Units is not available centrally.

Mater Maternity Unit

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of

births in the last 12 months; and (ii) the number of births that can be accommodated annually, at the Mater Maternity Unit. (AQW 4400/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of births in the last 12 months at the Down Midwife-led Maternity Unit, the Craigavon Maternity Unit, the Ulster Maternity Unit, the Mater Maternity Unit and the Royal Victoria Maternity Unit are given in the table below.

Hospital	Number of Births in 2007
Down Maternity Unit*	0
Craigavon	3,708
Ulster	2,950
Mater	1,174
Royal Victoria	5,482

*Downe Maternity Unit closed from 2003/2004

Information on the number of births that can be accommodated annually at each of these Units is not available centrally.

Appleby Trust

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the plans he has to assist the Appleby Trust in securing long term funding, to ensure that people with learning disabilities currently being assisted by the Trust continue to be assisted and supported in their work placements within the Armagh area; and to confirm whether or not he will liaise with the Department for Employment and Learning to increase the level of funding available to sustain the organisation for the future. (AQW 4445/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Directors of the Appleby Trust have advised the Southern Health and Social Care Trust (SHSCT) that an anonymous benefactor has offered the Appleby Trust funding for 2008/2009, with the proviso that match funding be provided by the SHSCT. The match funding has been agreed in principle and meetings are scheduled for March 2008 to agree on operational details.

This should secure the continuation of the Appleby Trust for the next year and during this time the SHSCT will be reviewing all services for people with a learning disability provided by voluntary and independent sector to ensure the most effective service provision for clients.

I am informed that the Appleby Trust is not currently funded by DEL nor has it approached DEL for funding.

Bamford Review of Mental Health

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the current status of the implementation of the Bamford Review of Mental Health. (AQO 2189/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Boards and Trusts are already planning and developing services in line with Bamford recommendations. However, implementation of the Review requires a Government-wide response and my Department is leading on this work. I am aiming to submit the response document to the Executive for approval in May 2008 and the response will then be issued for public consultation.

Child Poverty

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to address the health inequalities associated with child poverty. (AQO 2166/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The cross-departmental Investing for Health Strategy clearly recognises the impact that childhood poverty has on health inequalities. My Department is currently addressing this through Investing for Health and its underpinning healthy lifestyle strategies, all of which have a particular focus on tackling health inequalities.

In addition proposals included in the 'Families Matter,' and 'Care Matters' strategies are designed to meet the needs of those vulnerable children who are particularly susceptible to health inequalities.

Waiting Times

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the reasons for the current waiting time for an outpatient appointment at the Ulster Hospital, Dundonald being eight weeks. (AQO 2105/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have set a target to ensure that no patient is waiting longer than 13 weeks for a first outpatient appointment by 31 March 2008. Excellent progress is being made by all Trusts towards this target and I am confident that it will be achieved. The transformation in waiting times seen over the last two years has been as a result of a comprehensive programme of investment and reform by my Department, Boards and Trusts.

Regional Suicide Helpline

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the support services and back-up that is available for people who ring the regional suicide helpline. (AQO 2190/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The regional 24/7 suicide prevention telephone helpline is available 365 (366 in 2008) days of the year, 24 hours a day. All calls made to the helpline are answered directly by an appropriately qualified counsellor. Callers in distress will be offered an immediate clinical assessment. The assessment will address the risk including the immediate medical risk, available resources including family/friends and access to voluntary, community or statutory services. The services available include rapid response telephone counselling, face to face counselling, peer mentoring support, referral to primary/secondary care services and signposting to appropriate community resources. The provider is also required to develop strong linkages/referral pathways/protocols with both existing statutory and community/voluntary sectors.

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. (AQO 2099/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I know about the valuable work that is being supported by the Children's Fund, and would like to be in a position to continue to fund everything that we would wish to. However, given the tough Budget settlement, the financial reality is that this will not be possible.

I have agreed that my Department should support Home Start Ards, Comber and Peninsula for one more year at their current levels of funding.

Details of individual grant awards, and conditions attaching, will be notified to projects shortly.

Capital Spending

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his plans for capital spending in the East Antrim constituency over the next three years. (AQO 2153/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Board and Trust have submitted a Stage 2 Outline Business Case identifying the Carrickfergus Health and Care Centre and the Larne Health and Care Centre and Day Centre as

priority projects within Phase 1 of the Primary and Community Care Infrastructure programme. However the outcome for my Department of this year's Comprehensive Spending Review will only allow current contractual commitments to be met with only a small number of schemes to be started from scratch and completed in the next 3 years. It is unlikely that these two schemes will progress during the next 3 years unless additional funding can be secured.

Health Discussions

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not he will meet with a delegation of East Antrim Assembly Members to discuss health issues within this constituency. (AQO 2187/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I would be pleased to meet with a delegation of East Antrim MLAs to discuss health issues within this constituency.

Clostridium Difficile

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of cases of clostridium difficile at Causeway Hospital over the last five years. (AQO 2143/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Clostridium difficile mandatory surveillance programme commenced in January 2005. Since that date cases of Clostridium difficile-associated diarrhoea in those aged over 65 years have been recorded. This information is available by hospital and Trust, and figures are available up to 30 September 2007. The figures for Causeway Hospital are:

2005	52
2006	50
2007, to 30 Sept	27

During the first year of the mandatory surveillance programme some laboratories had to change their method of detecting Clostridium difficile. Since 2006 all laboratories have been detecting and reporting Clostridium difficile in those aged 65 years and over in a standardised manner.

The Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre Northern Ireland (CDSC) does hold records from Causeway laboratory for Clostridium difficile, for all ages, from before 2005 but it is not possible to fully disaggregate those originating from Causeway

hospital, other hospitals in that area or specimens from GP sources in the Causeway area.

Services at the Mater Hospital

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what his assessment is of the future provision of services at the Mater Hospital. (AQO 2186/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Developing Better Services sets out the future provision of acute services and in his speech, former Minister Des Browne highlighted the need to ensure the Mater delivered a full range of acute services for a considerable period ahead. I fully agree and understand not only the high regard with which the Mater Hospital is held by the local community in north Belfast, but also realise the pivotal role it plays in providing vital acute services to the Greater Belfast population.

Omagh Fire Station

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given the additional £14 million capital funding for the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS), to give a timeframe within which the Omagh Fire Station will receive the enhanced emergency cover highlighted by the NIFRS as being necessary for the area. (AQO 2150/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is a matter for the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service Board and its Chief Fire Officer to determine the priorities of the capital budget, including renewal / upgrading of fire stations. They have been working closely with my Department and others to complete an overarching Business Case for the modernisation of buildings, appliances and equipment. Omagh is one of the priority stations and the timing of construction of this, and other new stations, will emerge as the business case progresses.

Suicide Awareness and Prevention

Mr Butler 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 2231/08)

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, e.g. Risk Assessment: Suicide and Self-harm, and can undertake an internationally recognised programme called ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Workshop). Mental Health nurses can access additional courses such as Management of the Suicidal Patient. These courses are provided by the In-service Consortia (made up of EDUCARE and the Beeches Management Centre).

However, comprehensive statistics on the numbers of post-registration nurses who have received suicide awareness and prevention training are not available. Figures provided by the Beeches Management Centre show that 402 nurses have attended the Risk Management course over a 10 year period and 34 have attended the Management of the Suicidal Patient. ASIST has been running for 18 months with 34 attending. Figures from EDUCARE show that since September 2006, 20 have attended the Management of the Suicidal Patient course and 66 attended the Risk Management course.

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.

Treatment Centre for Banbridge

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the new Health and Social Care Treatment Centre for Banbridge. (AQO 2181/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The proposal for a new Health and Care Centre along with a new Learning Disability Day Centre, on the Banbridge community health village site is a high priority within the Primary and Community Care Infrastructure (PCCI) Programme. The business case for the project is currently being appraised and further input is being sought from the Southern Health and Social Care Trust before a decision on approval can be taken. It is expected that a decision will be made by the end of March 2008.

Suicide Inquiry

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made in implementing the recommendations from the inquiry into the suicide of Danny McCartan. (AQO 2228/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Boards and Trusts have developed action plans to address recommendations arising from the Independent Report on the suicide of Danny McCartan Report. A number of key actions points have already been implemented and work is ongoing to implement the remainder.

Epilepsy Treatment

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the steps he is taking to ensure National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidelines are being followed in relation to epilepsy treatment in Northern Ireland. (AQO 2140/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 31 January 2008, my Department endorsed the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guideline on the management of epilepsy as being valid for Northern Ireland. This requires Health and Social Care sector organisations to take account of the NICE guidelines in their planning and delivery of services to people with epilepsy.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Train Services

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of people who have used train services in and out of Belfast in each of the last five years. (AQW 3733/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): The number of passengers boarding and alighting at Central, Botanic, City Hospital and Great Victoria Street stations in the last three years was:

2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
5.1 million	5.3 million	6.1 million

Translink extracted this information from the Wayfarer ticketing database which was installed in 2003/04. Translink does not hold details of the number of passengers using train services in and out of Belfast

prior to this and, as a result, is unable to provide figures for either 2002/03 or 2003/04.

Waste Produced

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the percentage of waste produced by the department that is recycled. (AQW 3793/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: A recent waste audit for the Department's headquarters building, Clarence Court, which is shared with another Department, confirmed that the percentage of waste recycled had increased from 10% in 2004 to 75%. Similar recycling arrangements exist in other buildings, many of which are also shared, but no figures are maintained by the Department of the overall percentage of waste recycled.

In addition, a recent study undertaken in partnership with the Quarry Products Association (NI), has indicated that a maximum of 10% by volume of secondary and recycled materials is normally included as part of the road construction layers.

Roads Service is also currently working with Waste and Resources Action Partnership in a pilot scheme to determine the total value of recycled products used within road schemes.

Under works contracts awarded by Roads Service, the contractor is responsible for disposal of all waste associated with the contract to appropriate licensed waste disposal or recycling sites. Roads Service is not able to accurately track the quantity of waste material that is actually recycled in the licensed facility.

Largy Road Route Study

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the implementation of the B52 Largy Road Route Study. (AQW 3835/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that since my last response to the Member's Assembly Question, AQW 601/08, the minor works scheme at Cashelstown Crossroads, which was included in the implementation of the B52 Largy Road Route Study, is substantially complete. This scheme will introduce a one way system on the western leg of this road from the Largy Road towards Kilcurry Road, thereby preventing access onto the Largy Road at this junction where sight lines are sub-standard. In addition, there have been improvements to the sight distance at the junction of Kilcurry Road and Cashelstown Road.

My previous response advised that the B52 Largy Road Route Study also identified a number of locations where it was considered that improvements would be beneficial, and that improvements at the Gillistown Road Junction were completed. Assessment of the remaining scheme proposals is ongoing with a view to advancing to preliminary design stage and subsequent prioritisation within a works programme for Roads Service's Northern Division. Prioritisation will take account of the technical merit of each scheme, availability of funding, Council consultation and Road Service priorities.

A4 and A5 Dualling

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the timescale anticipated for the completion of the A4 and A5 duelling and road improvements. (AQW 3867/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the construction contract for the A4 dualling between Dungannon and Ballygawley, and improvement works on the A4 at Annaghilla and the A5 at Tullyvar was awarded on 16 November 2007 and work has commenced on site. I anticipate completion of the dual carriageway between Dungannon and Ballygawley in late 2010.

In relation to the proposed A5 dualling from Derry to the border at Aghnacloy, Roads Service has commissioned consultants to undertake a route corridor study.

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 and publication of draft statutory orders associated with the Environmental Statement, Direction Order and Vesting Order, in 2010. However, it is not practical to set further milestones for the project at this stage, as the timing of the works will be dependent on the outcome of the statutory orders.

Parking Schemes

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a timescale in which he intends to make a statement to the Assembly in relation to the outcome of the consultation on a policy for residents' parking schemes. (AQW 3880/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I do not intend to make a statement to the Assembly in relation to the outcome of the consultation on a policy for residents' parking schemes.

However, I can confirm, that, following consultation with the Regional Departmental Committee, the policy was finalised and that the consultation document, together with the consultation report and detailed feedback analysis, have been placed on my Department's Roads Service internet site. Those who responded have been advised accordingly.

You may be interested to know that, following the consultation process, a number of changes were made to the policy including:

- a reduction in the cost of a residents permit from £80 to £40, where the scheme falls wholly or partly within a Neighbourhood Renewal Area as defined by the Department for Social Development; and
- a change in the time limit for a visitors permit which will now be valid for a full day's scheme operation.

Roads Service is now in the early stages of implementing the policy and survey work is currently underway in a number of areas where schemes may be introduced.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development 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 3902/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: For the period 8 May 2007 to 15 February 2008 I have:

- Met delegations representing one or more Councils on 10 occasions. This includes meetings which took place during visits to Councils.
- Met once with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, and
- Not met with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives.

Road Upgrade

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what plans he has to upgrade the B52 Randalstown to Portglenone road, in preparation for increased traffic when the new A6 Randalstown to Castledawson dual carriageway is being constructed. (AQW 3913/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised me that they have no plans to upgrade the B52 Randalstown to Portglenone road, at this time.

The proposed alignment for the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson dual carriageway is mostly off line, except for a section between the Moyola River and the Castledawson Roundabout. The vast majority of the construction work will be carried out with minimal interference to the travelling public, and there will only be short periods of disruption when connections are made to and from the existing network.

Wheelchair Use

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of discussions he has had with disabled groups, in relation to the having kerbs dropped for wheelchair use in (i) the Ards area; and (ii) the Strangford constituency. (AQW 3921/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have not been directly involved in any discussions with disabled groups, in relation to having kerbs dropped for wheelchair use in the Ards area or the Strangford constituency.

While my Department's Roads Service has no record of meetings with disabled groups to discuss the issue of dropped kerbs specifically within these areas, I can advise that officials are currently finalising a policy for the use of dropped kerbs and tactile paving surfaces. This aims to formalize the current custom and practice in the use of dropped kerbs in the following circumstances:

- at all road crossing points in road improvement schemes, resurfacing project or footway reconstruction works;
- on existing footways, as part of a pedestrian route strategy;
- in town centres, to ensure that all areas are accessible; and
- in urban areas, on routes that link residential areas with town centre or other large commercial centres.

During the development of this policy, which is about to be published, Roads Service conducted an Equality Impact Assessment, in accordance with the terms of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. This incorporated formal consultation with each of the equality categories identified under Section 75, including a number of groups representing disabled people.

Budgetary Allocation

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the budgetary allocation for the maintenance of roads in (i) the Omagh district; (ii) the Strabane district; (iii) the Dungannon district; and (iv)

the Cookstown district, in 2008/2009, 2009/2010 and 2010/2011. (AQW 3924/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Road Service overall budget allocations for 2008/09, 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 have not yet been finalised.

You may wish to note that Roads Service does not budget on a District Council basis. Budget allocations are based on need, rather than Council boundaries. While some elements of Roads Service's operational budget including resurfacing, patching, gully emptying, grass cutting etc are allocated on a Section Office basis, whose boundaries generally correspond with those of the District Councils, these figures do not give an overall indication of actual spend within the Section Office area. Sizeable elements of the budget are allocated either on a Divisional basis, or indeed on a province-wide basis.

Belfast to Bangor Railway Line

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Regional Development to (i) outline his plans for the future development of the Belfast to Bangor Railway line; (ii) confirm whether or not these include the provision of a station/stop to service the expanding retail development at Holywood Exchange; and (iii) detail the passenger numbers using the line in (a) 2003-04; (b) 2004-05; and (c) 2005-06. (AQW 3931/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Works to improve accessibility, lighting and signage is almost complete on railway halts along this line. During 2008 Northern Ireland Railways will prepare to pilot a new passenger information system within the Greater Belfast Area and, following successful trials, this will roll out to halts /stations on the Bangor line during 2009-2011.

There are no current plans to provide additional rail halts at Holywood Exchange following the completion of the new Ikea Store. Planning permissions for the Ikea site were granted on condition of the provision of enhanced public transport facilities based on bus services linking Holywood Exchange to the centre of Belfast. Translink operate special Saturday day-trip services to Ikea from five major towns Derry, Omagh, Coleraine, Armagh and Newry, and further journey stops are made for passengers boarding along these routes.

Translink will continue to seek to expand Park and Ride facilities along the Belfast to Bangor railway line as opportunities arise and funding becomes available.

The passenger numbers using the line were:

2003/04	1,544,386
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2004/05	1,517,300
2005/06	1,860,700

Due to a ticketing system problem accurate passenger journey information for 2003/04 is not available. The figure given is the mid-point between the 2002/03 and 2004/05 passenger journey estimates.

Memorials on Public Roads

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 1650/08, to list the memorials that have been erected on public roads without lawful authority. (AQW 3939/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: When last counted in November 2007, there were 106 illegally erected monuments on public roads of which 72 relate to road traffic fatalities, 31 relating directly to the troubles and 3 erected to mark deaths due to other causes.

The locations of the 31 memorials relating to the troubles are readily available and are listed in the table below. However, Roads Service does not maintain a record to whom the memorials were erected.

If the Member wants a list of the locations of the other memorials he should write to the Roads Service's Acting Chief Executive, who will arrange for the information to be collated and sent to him.

Location Of Illegally Erected Monuments
Junction at Moss Road, Stoneyford Road, Ballypitmave Road, Steedstown Road, Y Bridge Road, Stoneyford
Roundabout at Upper Dunmurry Lane at the junction with Stewartstown Road, Colin Road, Pantridge Road, Belfast
Malachy Conlon Park, Cullaville
Dorans Hill at Raymond Kelly Park, Newry
Derrybeg Estate, Newry
Derrybeg at junction of Camlough Road, Newry
Tievecrom Road, Forkhill, Newry
Tullynavall Road, Cullyhanna
Donaldson's Road at Ballyfannahan Road, Cullyhanna
Kelly's Road, Killeen
Edenappa Road, Jonesborough
Annaghgad Road, Cullaville
Newry Road, Camlough
Kilmorey Street Flood defence wall, Newry
Buttercrane Quay, Newry
Barley Lane, Newry
Ford's Cross, Silverbridge
Newry Bypass, Newry
Skerriff Road, Cullyhanna

Location Of Illegally Erected Monuments
Near frontier, Cashel Road, Enniskillen
Clonliff Road, Enniskillen
Near frontier Drumnasreane Road, Enniskillen
Eshnadarragh Road, Rosslea
Opposite Holiday Centre, Garrison
Swanlinbar Road, Enniskillen
Eshnadarragh Altawalk Cross, Rosslea
Drumnakilly Road, Omagh
Water Wall Footpath, Mourne Bridge, Strabane
Annagher Road, Coalisland
Drum Road, Near to Teebane Road, Cookstown
Corrick Road, Dungiven

Rail Passengers

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the percentage increase of passengers on the (i) Belfast to Larne; (ii) Belfast to Derry/Londonderry; (iii) Belfast to Bangor; and (iv) Belfast to Portadown, rail lines, over the last 5 years. (AQW 3951/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The percentage increases in passenger numbers from 2001/02 to 2006/07 were - 3% on the Belfast to Larne line, 62% on the Belfast to Derry/Londonderry line, 49% on the Belfast to Bangor line and 48% on the Belfast to Portadown rail line.

Passenger journeys on the Larne line fell in 2005/06 because of a disruption to service caused by a major track re-lay. Since the re-opening of the line in February 2006, passenger numbers have grown steadily and are now on target to carry a record 1.9 million passengers this year.

You should note that since April 2004 the method of counting passenger numbers changed. The 2001/02 baseline figures are estimates based on the new methodology.

Written Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of written questions received since May 2007, and the average length of time taken to publish a response. (AQW 3974/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have answered 659 written Assembly Questions during the period 8 May 2007 to 31 January 2008. The average length of time taken for each question to be forwarded

to the Assembly Business Office for publication is 6.21 days.

Mothballed Railway Stations

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount spent on maintenance (excluding track maintenance), security and repairs at the mothballed railway stations at Crumlin, Glenavy, Ballinderry and Knockmore in each of 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007. (AQW 4028/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The following table provides a summary of station maintenance and security costs on the Antrim to Knockmore line between 2002/03 and 2006/07.

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	Total
Revenue	£8,500	£9,120	£9,744	£5,516	£21,190	£54,070
Capital	£0	£0	£25,150	£0	£0	£25,150
Total	£8,500	£9,120	£34,894	£5,516	£21,190	£79,220

Knockmore Railway Line

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number; and (ii) type of trains that used the Knockmore railway line in 2007; (iii) the purpose of the journeys; and (iv) the date on which this line was last used. (AQW 4029/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: During 2007 the Knockmore line was used once for driver training and twice for pilotman training (all using class 450 units). In addition, the Knockmore line was twice used for infrastructure work. The last time the Knockmore line was used on 4 November for pilotman training and there has been no further activity to date this year.

Transport Holding Company

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail all land owned by the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHC) in the South Antrim parliamentary constituency, broken down by (i) the number of sites owned; (ii) the location of each site; (iii) the size of each site; (iv) what each site is used for; and (v) the length of time each site has been owned by the NITHC. (AQW 4031/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The land owned by the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHC) in the South Antrim parliamentary constituency, broken down by (i) the

number of sites owned; (ii) the location of each site; (iii) the size of each site; (iv) what each site is used for; and (v) the length of time each site has been owned by the NITHC, is set out below.

1. Ballyclare	
Location	Mill Road
Use	Bus Station
Area	0.735 acres approx
Ownership	Inherited from Ulster Transport Authority (UTA) in 1967

2. Antrim	
Location	Station Road
Use	Bus Station
Area	1.38 acres approx
Ownership	Inherited from UTA in 1967

3.	
Location	Station Road
Use	Railway Station
Area	0.54 acres approx
Ownership	Inherited from UTA in 1967

4.	
Location	Steeple Road
Use	Warehouse and yard
Area	0.38 acres approx
Ownership	Inherited from UTA in 1967

5.	
Location	Railway Street/Church Street
Use	Vacant (originally purchased for new bus station)
Area	0.70 acres approx
Ownership	Purchased 1993

6.	
Location	Steeple Road
Use	Park and Ride
Area	0.37 acres approx
Ownership	Inherited from UTA in 1967

7. Muckamore	
Location	159 Belfast Road
Use	Vacant (possible location for bridge across railway)
Area	3.24 acres approx

7. Muckamore	
Ownership	Purchased 2007

8. Mossley Halt	
Location	Doagh Road
Use	Park and Ride
Area	0.75 acres approx
Ownership	Purchased 1999

9. Kingsbog	
Location	Ballyclare Road
Use	Vacant arable land
Area	5.34 acres approx
Ownership	Purchased to close accommodation crossings 1999

10. Ballypalady	
Location	Ballypalady Road
Use	Vacant arable land
Area	2 acres approx
Ownership	Purchased to close accommodation crossings 1999

11. Ballypalady	
Location	Between Ballypalady Road & Templepatrick
Road	
Use	Arable land (let in con acre)
Area	6.84 acres approx
Ownership	Purchased to close accommodation crossings 1999

12. Crumlin	
Location	Main Street
Use	Railway Station + land beside station
Area	5.3 acres approx
Ownership	Inherited from UTA 1967

13.	
Location	Main Street
Use	Bus Depot
Area	0.8 acres approx
Ownership	Inherited from UTA 1967

14. Ildergrove Station (disused)	
Location	Station Road
Use	Disused railway station
Area	1.85 acres approx

14. Ildergrove Station (disused)	
Ownership	Inherited from UTA 1967

15. Permanent Way	
The permanent way between stations was inherited in 1967 from UTA. This is land on which the track is laid and includes all embankments gripe (a gripe is a 6 foot strip of land for maintenance to fences hedges etc.) and sheughs.	
The length of the permanent way in South Antrim is approximately 31 miles.	

Sewerage Infrastructure

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline plans to upgrade Northern Ireland's sewerage infrastructure over the next five years. (AQW 4051/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that substantial investment will continue to be directed towards improving wastewater treatment and sewers, with committed expenditure of £492 million in the three year period up to 2010 together with Public Private Partnership investment of £122 million. NIW has completed a number of drainage area plans to identify deficiencies within the sewerage system and a programme of sewer network improvements is ongoing. In addition, poorly performing small wastewater treatment works serving local communities will benefit from investment of £30 million in the period up to 2014.

NIW's post 2010 budget will depend on the outcome of the regulatory periodic review in 2009. While it is not possible to define exactly what works will be progressed from 2010, it is expected that compliance with wastewater standards will be comparable with the water companies in Britain by 2015.

Penalty Charge Notices

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of Penalty Charge Notice (PCN) discounts that have been applied in the last year, following payment of the PCN within 14 days, (i) in total; and (ii) by district council area. (AQW 4052/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In the period 1 February 2007 to 31 January 2008, 105,213 Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs), were paid at the discounted amount. My Department's Roads Service does not collate this data by district council area, however, on the basis of percentage figures for the

issue of PCNs, an estimated breakdown for the figure is as follows:

Council Area	PCNs Paid at Discount 1/2/07 to 31/1/08 (est.)	Council Area	PCNs Paid at Discount 1/2/07 to 31/1/08 (est.)
Antrim	1609	Dungannon	2263
Ards	2549	Fermanagh	6885
Armagh	2859	Larne	629
Ballymena	3901	Limavady	1239
Ballymoney	1327	Lisburn	3725
Banbridge	1393	Magherafelt	2355
Belfast (including Castlereagh)	29260	Moyle	190
Carrickfergus	1847	Newry & Mourne	4100
Coleraine	4421	Newtownabbey	1310
Cookstown	1704	North Down	3543
Craigavon	5207	Omagh	4286
Derry	12847	Strabane	2832
Down	2932		

For the same period, the number of PCNs issued to vehicles parked in a disabled person's parking space, without clearly displaying a blue badge, is 6,017. A breakdown, by district council area is given below:

Council Area	PCNs – Disabled Person's Spaces, 1/2/07 to 31/1/08	Council Area	PCNs – Disabled Person's Spaces, 1/2/07 to 31/1/08
Antrim	94	Dungannon	187
Ards	153	Fermanagh	258
Armagh	132	Larne	160
Ballymena	447	Limavady	110
Ballymoney	155	Lisburn	137
Banbridge	84	Magherafelt	238
Belfast (including Castlereagh)	427	Moyle	31
Carrickfergus	191	Newry & Mourne	160
Coleraine	525	Newtownabbey	62
Cookstown	352	North Down	186

Council Area	PCNs – Disabled Person's Spaces, 1/2/07 to 31/1/08	Council Area	PCNs – Disabled Person's Spaces, 1/2/07 to 31/1/08
Craigavon	566	Omagh	319
Derry	448	Strabane	160
Down	435		

Penalty Charge Notices

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of Penalty Charge Notices that have been issued by traffic attendants to vehicles occupying a parking bay for disabled persons in the last year, (i) in total; and (ii) by district council area. (AQW 4054/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In the period 1 February 2007 to 31 January 2008, 105,213 Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs), were paid at the discounted amount. My Department's Roads Service does not collate this data by district council area, however, on the basis of percentage figures for the issue of PCNs, an estimated breakdown for the figure is as follows:

Council Area	PCNs Paid at Discount 1/2/07 to 31/1/08 (est.)	Council Area	PCNs Paid at Discount 1/2/07 to 31/1/08 (est.)
Antrim	1609	Dungannon	2263
Ards	2549	Fermanagh	6885
Armagh	2859	Larne	629
Ballymena	3901	Limavady	1239
Ballymoney	1327	Lisburn	3725
Banbridge	1393	Magherafelt	2355
Belfast (including Castlereagh)	29260	Moyle	190
Carrickfergus	1847	Newry & Mourne	4100
Coleraine	4421	Newtownabbey	1310
Cookstown	1704	North Down	3543
Craigavon	5207	Omagh	4286
Derry	12847	Strabane	2832
Down	2932		

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Ballymoney	155	Lisburn	137
Banbridge	84	Magherafelt	238
Belfast (including Castlereagh)	427	Moyle	31
Carrickfergus	191	Newry & Mourne	160
Coleraine	525	Newtownabbey	62
Cookstown	352	North Down	186
Craigavon	566	Omagh	319
Derry	448	Strabane	160
Down	435		

Blue Badge Misuse

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to the blue badge parking scheme, to detail the number of blue badges that have been confiscated owing to misuse in each of the last three years, (i) in total; and (ii) by district council area. (AQW 4055/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, in the last three years, no Blue Badges have been withdrawn as a result of misuse.

Water Mains Replacement

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of the last mile of water mains replacement completed. (AQW 4057/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the average cost per mile for water mains replacement is £137,000. This reflects the most common diameters of water main and takes into account a range of ground conditions and a variety of road reinstatement categories.

Bus Purchases

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of the last bus purchased. (AQW 4058/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: During 2007, the cost of buses ranged from £113,707 to £163,416. The last bus purchased was a single deck bus costing £139,000.00.

Single Lane Road

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of the last one mile stretch of single lane roadway constructed. (AQW 4059/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Omagh Throughpass, which opened to traffic on 13 October 2006, was the last single carriageway Major Works scheme to be constructed. The total cost to provide this 2.4km of single carriageway, was £11.2 million, which equates to £4.6 million per km or £7.4 million per mile. However, I should advise that this scheme included two bridges and extensive retaining walls, which added considerable costs. It also traversed both urban and rural environments.

A57 Antrim/Dublin Road

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any scheduled, or proposed, upgrades to the A57 Antrim/Dublin Road which will take place in the next three years. (AQW 4062/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is currently progressing proposals to develop a road widening and realignment scheme on the A57 Antrim Road/Dublin Road in County Antrim. Considering the length and complexity of this improvement scheme (approx 1.8km), and the potential significant costs involved in its delivery, it is likely the scheme will be brought forward in stages.

You may also be aware that the airport authority has plans, at an advanced stage, to provide a roundabout at the junction of the Antrim Road/Ballyrobin Road and to realign the Antrim Road for a distance of approximately 400m in a northerly direction from this proposed roundabout. It is intended that Roads Service's proposed scheme will link into these works.

I would stress however, that the proposal for improvement works on the A57, as with all such proposals, is subject to a detailed economic appraisal, clearing of the relevant statutory procedures and the availability of funds at that time. I am not yet in a position to indicate the possible timescale for these

works, although it is hoped that the first stage could commence within the next three years.

Communication Access

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development 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 4063/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: (i) The Department uses textphones, induction loop systems, the internet, SMS text, e-mail, fax and sign language interpreters to help hard of hearing and deaf people to access its services and those provided under the Transport Programme for People with Disabilities and the Rural Community Transport Partnerships. Appropriate staff, such as booking centre staff for Door-to-Door Transport, are trained in disability equality, etiquette and attitude, equal rights, passenger handling and customer services.

(ii) The method of communication can be oral, written or sign, depending on the facility used. For example, the services provided by the Transport Programme for People with Disabilities and the Rural Community Transport Partnerships can be booked using textphone, SMS text or the Internet. Material issued by the Department advertises text phone numbers and other accessible methods of communication. Induction loops and sign language interpreters are engaged as necessary to facilitate face-to face contacts.

(iii) Hard of hearing or deaf people are made aware of the services available and how to access them by written material, the internet, information seminars, presentations to disabled and community organisations, advertisements in newspapers and disability-related magazines, display of leaflets and posters in public places such as doctors' surgeries, citizens advice bureaux, bus and rail stations, etc. The Department also provides information on a number of programmes it supports, such as the Transport Programme for People with Disabilities, the Rural Community Transport Partnerships and other accessible services, on the Getting Out and About website (www.ni-transportguide.info). In addition, the Department has developed a Guide to Making Information Accessible to ensure that its information and services are accessible to people with physical, sensory and learning difficulties and those whose first language is not English.

This is on the internet and includes specific advice on communicating with deaf and hard of hearing people.

Meeting Requests

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of meeting requests he has received since May 2007. (AQW 4065/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have received 166 meeting requests from 8 May 2007 to 18 February 2008.

This figure does not include requests to attend events such as dinners, presentations, seminars or conferences.

Safety Barrier

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans to erect a safety barrier at the corner opposite 41 Rowreagh Road, Ardkeen, Portaferry. (AQW 4076/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: While I am aware that several vehicles lost control and left the carriageway in the vicinity of No. 41 Rowreagh Road on 3 January 2008, I have been informed by officials in my Department's Roads Service that this occurred as the result of heavy snow and ice which was present at the time.

The erection of crash barriers is subject to certain criteria and this site would rate as low priority in the assessment procedure.

Pelican Crossing in Glenavy

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans to provide a pelican crossing in Glenavy, Co Antrim. (AQW 4078/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Requests for Pelican crossings are assessed using established criteria relating to the number of pedestrians crossing the road and the volume of vehicles.

Officials from my Department's Roads Service advise that their latest survey, carried out at Main Street Glenavy in 2006, confirmed that the criteria for the provision of a Pelican crossing were not met. The results of the survey fell well below those required to justify a Pelican crossing and, as such, there are no current plans to provide one.

Water Mains Supply

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a timescale within which the water mains on the Lettercarn Road, Castlederg, will be upgraded. (AQW 4124/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it is not

proposing to upgrade the water main on the Lettercarn Road, Castlederg. However, water mains which supply the Lettercarn Road area will be replaced under the Derg West Rehabilitation Zone project, which is scheduled for completion by early 2009. This work should lead to an improvement in water pressure to homes in the area and reduce the risk of interruptions to the water supply.

Building New Roads

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the expenditure on building new roads, broken down by county and the amount spent per mile of road, in the last five years. (AQW 4149/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service does not maintain an analysis of its capital spend on a county basis. It does, however, undertake an analysis of actual spend during the preceding financial year in each Council area and retains a breakdown of miles of road managed in each Council area. The total capital spend includes Major Capital, Minor Capital, Street Lighting, Car Parks, Other Capital (including Ferry), Transportation Policy and Land.

In providing this information, I should explain that Roads Service does not simply split its total budget for capital expenditure on roads across all the district council areas. Major road improvements are prioritised on a countrywide basis taking account of a broad range of criteria such as strategic planning policy, traffic flow, number of accidents, potential travel save times, environmental impact, accessibility and value for money. While the actual spend on a major works scheme may be within one district council area, the benefits of such schemes are not confined to the district council, constituency or county in which they are located. This is evidenced by the spend per mile analysis provided in that there is little consistency between council areas and over the years in question.

Roads Service expenditure on minor road improvements includes minor works, accident remedial schemes, transportation measure and minor bridge strengthening. The resources available for such works are allocated to the four Roads Service Divisions and, in turn, apportioned across district council areas on a needs-based priority approach using indicators such as population, weighted road lengths and the number of accidents. This ensures, so far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds across the country.

The table below provides details of capital spend in each of the last five years.

District Council	Length (miles)*	Capital Spend									
		02-03		03-04		04-05		05-06		06-07	
		£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile
Antrim	497	9,825	20	10,066	20	4,952	10	1,901	4	2,801	6
Coleraine	532	933	2	1,143	2	2,555	5	2,152	4	1,380	3
Limavady	403	9,553	24	3,490	9	2,615	6	1,390	3	1,145	3
Moyle	325	213	1	151	0	333	1	383	1	177	1
Ballymoney	349	354	1	264	1	948	3	3,753	11	1,223	4
L'derry	557	3,009	5	4,081	7	9,325	17	9,165	16	3,754	7
Ballymena	617	959	2	724	1	1,259	2	2,343	4	1,910	3
Larne	298	612	2	1,956	7	650	2	1,825	6	346	1
Belfast	548	9,875	18	8,443	15	20,160	37	7,246	13	26,628	49
Castlereagh	220	506	2	664	3	1,551	7	8,440	38	835	4
Newtownabbey	323	2,380	7	4,572	14	5,694	18	3,476	11	1,578	5
Carrickfergus	137	392	3	441	3	721	5	1,712	12	2,566	19
North Down	225	947	4	568	3	1,310	6	1,892	8	1,916	9
Lisburn	730	1,308	2	2,209	3	3,097	4	3,855	5	3,673	5
Ards	473	2,879	6	3,685	8	1,859	4	1,790	4	1,725	4
Armagh	1070	681	1	947	1	2,561	2	2,270	2	1,677	2
Newry & Mourne	1067	1,185	1	7,780	7	19,922	19	17,692	17	62,010	58
Banbridge	635	1,251	2	3,845	6	4,018	6	2,262	4	2,221	3

District Council	Length (miles)*	Capital Spend									
		02-03		03-04		04-05		05-06		06-07	
		£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile
Craigavon	507	1,410	3	1,944	4	3,973	8	4,879	10	1,803	4
Down	711	528	1	719	1	1,721	2	2,679	4	1,539	2
Magherafelt	571	661	1	637	1	1,964	3	1,344	2	966	2
Omagh	1171	1,670	1	1,366	1	6,201	5	7,869	7	3,455	3
Strabane	850	7,828	9	2,056	2	2,274	3	3,006	4	2,067	2
Cookstown	558	537	1	673	1	948	2	975	2	1,078	2
Fermanagh	1280	895	1	1,163	1	3,675	3	4,137	3	2,121	2
Dungannon	956	419	0	746	1	3,556	4	5,401	6	15,361	16
Totals	15,608	60,810	4	64,333	4	107,842	7	103,837	7	145,955	9

* Road lengths are route miles as at 1 April 2007 and exclude slip road lengths

Road Repairs

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the projected expenditure on road repairs, broken down by county and the projected amount spent per mile of road, in the next financial year. (AQW 4150/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service does not maintain an analysis of its spend nor a breakdown of the number of

miles of road managed by it on a County basis. It does, however, undertake an analysis of actual spend during the preceeding financial year in each Council area and retains a breakdown of miles of road managed in each Council area.

In relation to AQW 4150/08, as spend is only analysed on a retrospective basis, I am not able to provide you with details of projected spend for 2008/09

District Council	Length (miles)*	Spend 02-03		Spend 03-04		Spend 04-05		Spend 05-06		Spend 06-07	
		£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile
Antrim	497	2,293	5	2,994	6	2,355	5	2,164	4	1,740	3
Coleraine	532	2,310	4	3,434	6	2,369	4	2,431	5	2,317	4
Limavady	403	1,625	4	2,637	7	2,061	5	2,020	5	1,561	4
Moyle	325	1,003	3	1,319	4	1,263	4	1,301	4	1,187	4
Ballymoney	349	1,914	5	2,055	6	1,540	4	1,527	4	1,433	4
L'derry	557	2,371	4	3,174	6	2,719	5	2,667	5	2,510	5
Ballymena	617	2,307	4	3,282	5	2,997	5	3,354	5	2,471	4
Larne	298	1,206	4	1,603	5	1,384	5	1,285	4	1,280	4
Belfast	548	6,192	11	6,328	12	5,943	11	5,408	10	4,946	9
Castlereagh	220	1,256	6	1,384	6	1,171	5	2,073	9	1,842	8
Newtownabby	323	2,247	7	2,037	6	2,207	7	1,412	4	1,869	6
Carrickfergus	137	1,068	8	919	7	824	6	754	5	934	7
North Down	225	2,911	13	2,642	12	1,279	6	2,537	11	2,368	11
Lisburn	730	3,678	5	4,782	7	4,463	6	3,585	5	3,077	4
Ards	473	1,802	4	2,264	5	2,217	5	2,120	4	2,118	4
Armagh	1070	3,068	3	3,869	4	4,117	4	4,202	4	3,661	3

District Council	Length (miles)*	Spend 02-03		Spend 03-04		Spend 04-05		Spend 05-06		Spend 06-07	
		£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile
Newry & Mourne	1067	3,249	3	4,376	4	4,863	5	4,394	4	3,634	3
Banbridge	635	2,252	4	2,639	4	2,374	4	2,511	4	2,222	3
Craigavon	507	2,859	6	3,186	6	3,381	7	3,055	6	2,948	6
Down	711	3,043	4	3,510	5	3,388	5	3,003	4	2,794	4
Magherafelt	571	1,901	3	2,700	5	2,178	4	2,346	4	1,755	3
Omagh	1171	4,040	3	4,910	4	4,024	3	3,939	3	3,458	3
Strabane	850	2,931	3	3,402	4	3,868	5	3,146	4	3,056	4
Cookstown	558	1,803	3	2,482	4	2,201	4	1,823	3	1,980	4
Fermanagh	1280	4,263	3	5,477	4	4,615	4	3,844	3	4,522	4
Dungannon	956	3,466	4	5,350	6	4,013	4	3,920	4	3,911	4
Totals	15,608	67,058	4	82,755	5	73,814	5	70,821	5	65,594	4

* Road lengths are route miles as at 1 April 2007 and exclude slip road lengths

Note: Structural maintenance includes resurfacing strengthening, surface dressing, patching and structural drainage.

Road Repairs

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the expenditure on road repairs, broken down by county and the amount spent per mile of road, in the last five years.

The Minister for Regional Development: In relation to AQW4151/08, the table below provides details of spend on structural maintenance in each of the last five years together with the number of miles managed in each Council area and the spend per mile.

District Council	Length (miles)*	Spend 02-03		Spend 03-04		Spend 04-05		Spend 05-06		Spend 06-07	
		£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile
Antrim	497	2,293	5	2,994	6	2,355	5	2,164	4	1,740	3
Coleraine	532	2,310	4	3,434	6	2,369	4	2,431	5	2,317	4
Limavady	403	1,625	4	2,637	7	2,061	5	2,020	5	1,561	4
Moyle	325	1,003	3	1,319	4	1,263	4	1,301	4	1,187	4
Ballymoney	349	1,914	5	2,055	6	1,540	4	1,527	4	1,433	4
L'derry	557	2,371	4	3,174	6	2,719	5	2,667	5	2,510	5
Ballymena	617	2,307	4	3,282	5	2,997	5	3,354	5	2,471	4
Larne	298	1,206	4	1,603	5	1,384	5	1,285	4	1,280	4
Belfast	548	6,192	11	6,328	12	5,943	11	5,408	10	4,946	9
Castlereagh	220	1,256	6	1,384	6	1,171	5	2,073	9	1,842	8
Newtownabbey	323	2,247	7	2,037	6	2,207	7	1,412	4	1,869	6
Carrickfergus	137	1,068	8	919	7	824	6	754	5	934	7
North Down	225	2,911	13	2,642	12	1,279	6	2,537	11	2,368	11
Lisburn	730	3,678	5	4,782	7	4,463	6	3,585	5	3,077	4
Ards	473	1,802	4	2,264	5	2,217	5	2,120	4	2,118	4
Armagh	1070	3,068	3	3,869	4	4,117	4	4,202	4	3,661	3
Newry & Mourne	1067	3,249	3	4,376	4	4,863	5	4,394	4	3,634	3
Banbridge	635	2,252	4	2,639	4	2,374	4	2,511	4	2,222	3

District Council	Length (miles)*	Spend 02-03		Spend 03-04		Spend 04-05		Spend 05-06		Spend 06-07	
		£k	£k/ mile	£k	£k/ mile	£k	£k/ mile	£k	£k/ mile	£k	£k/ mile
Craigavon	507	2,859	6	3,186	6	3,381	7	3,055	6	2,948	6
Down	711	3,043	4	3,510	5	3,388	5	3,003	4	2,794	4
Magherafelt	571	1,901	3	2,700	5	2,178	4	2,346	4	1,755	3
Omagh	1171	4,040	3	4,910	4	4,024	3	3,939	3	3,458	3
Strabane	850	2,931	3	3,402	4	3,868	5	3,146	4	3,056	4
Cookstown	558	1,803	3	2,482	4	2,201	4	1,823	3	1,980	4
Fermanagh	1280	4,263	3	5,477	4	4,615	4	3,844	3	4,522	4
Dungannon	956	3,466	4	5,350	6	4,013	4	3,920	4	3,911	4
Totals	15,608	67,058	4	82,755	5	73,814	5	70,821	5	65,594	4

* Road lengths are route miles as at 1 April 2007 and exclude slip road lengths

Note: Structural maintenance includes resurfacing strengthening, surface dressing, patching and structural drainage.

Road Repairs

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of miles of road managed by the Roads Service, broken down by county. (AQW 4152/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In relation to AQW 4152/08, the table below provides details of spend on structural maintenance in each of the last five years together with the number of miles managed in each Council area and the spend per mile.

District Council	Length (miles)*	Spend 02-03		Spend 03-04		Spend 04-05		Spend 05-06		Spend 06-07	
		£k	£k/ mile	£k	£k/ mile	£k	£k/ mile	£k	£k/ mile	£k	£k/ mile
Antrim	497	2,293	5	2,994	6	2,355	5	2,164	4	1,740	3
Coleraine	532	2,310	4	3,434	6	2,369	4	2,431	5	2,317	4
Limavady	403	1,625	4	2,637	7	2,061	5	2,020	5	1,561	4
Moyle	325	1,003	3	1,319	4	1,263	4	1,301	4	1,187	4
Ballymoney	349	1,914	5	2,055	6	1,540	4	1,527	4	1,433	4
L'derry	557	2,371	4	3,174	6	2,719	5	2,667	5	2,510	5
Ballymena	617	2,307	4	3,282	5	2,997	5	3,354	5	2,471	4
Larne	298	1,206	4	1,603	5	1,384	5	1,285	4	1,280	4
Belfast	548	6,192	11	6,328	12	5,943	11	5,408	10	4,946	9
Castlereagh	220	1,256	6	1,384	6	1,171	5	2,073	9	1,842	8
Newtownabbey	323	2,247	7	2,037	6	2,207	7	1,412	4	1,869	6
Carrickfergus	137	1,068	8	919	7	824	6	754	5	934	7
North Down	225	2,911	13	2,642	12	1,279	6	2,537	11	2,368	11
Lisburn	730	3,678	5	4,782	7	4,463	6	3,585	5	3,077	4
Ards	473	1,802	4	2,264	5	2,217	5	2,120	4	2,118	4
Armagh	1070	3,068	3	3,869	4	4,117	4	4,202	4	3,661	3
Newry & Mourne	1067	3,249	3	4,376	4	4,863	5	4,394	4	3,634	3
Banbridge	635	2,252	4	2,639	4	2,374	4	2,511	4	2,222	3
Craigavon	507	2,859	6	3,186	6	3,381	7	3,055	6	2,948	6
Down	711	3,043	4	3,510	5	3,388	5	3,003	4	2,794	4

District Council	Length (miles)*	Spend 02-03		Spend 03-04		Spend 04-05		Spend 05-06		Spend 06-07	
		£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile	£k	£k/mile
Magherafelt	571	1,901	3	2,700	5	2,178	4	2,346	4	1,755	3
Omagh	1171	4,040	3	4,910	4	4,024	3	3,939	3	3,458	3
Strabane	850	2,931	3	3,402	4	3,868	5	3,146	4	3,056	4
Cookstown	558	1,803	3	2,482	4	2,201	4	1,823	3	1,980	4
Fermanagh	1280	4,263	3	5,477	4	4,615	4	3,844	3	4,522	4
Dungannon	956	3,466	4	5,350	6	4,013	4	3,920	4	3,911	4
Totals	15,608	67,058	4	82,755	5	73,814	5	70,821	5	65,594	4

* Road lengths are route miles as at 1 April 2007 and exclude slip road lengths

Note: Structural maintenance includes resurfacing strengthening, surface dressing, patching and structural drainage.

Door-to-Door Scheme

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps he is taking to promote the Door-To-Door Transport scheme. (AQW 4169/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Department, in association with the operator of the services, has developed and implemented a marketing strategy to promote Door-to-Door transport services.

To date steps have included:

- Advertisements on local radio, in magazines read by our target group, and in doctors' surgeries, hospitals, local constituency offices, Citizens Advice Bureaux, community centres, and Shopmobility schemes;
- Presentations made to organizations that represent our target group, and information seminars for professionals dealing with disabled people;
- Local advertising and media events and photocalls to coincide with the launch of services in particular areas;
- Additional media events to publicise services.

In addition, the Department is currently in the process of appointing an agency to help promote the services over the coming years.

Door-to-Door Service

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail where the responsibility lies for the promotion of the Door-To-Door service. (AQW 4182/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The responsibility for promoting the Door-to-Door transport service lies with this Department. However, under contract arrangements, the operator of the

service, Chambers Coach Hire Ltd, also assists in promoting the services.

Pollution of the Colin River

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development whether or not he will carry out an investigation into the pollution of the Colin river, Dunmurry, by Northern Ireland Water. (AQW 4302/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Under the new regulatory regime, responsibility for investigating such pollution incidents and the subsequent initiation of prosecution proceedings against Northern Ireland Water (or anyone else) is a matter for the Environment and Heritage Service, which is the environmental regulator. Previously, prosecution against Water Service was not possible due to Crown Immunity.

I am advised that on 1 April 2007, an Inspector, acting on behalf of the Environment and Heritage Service, investigated a pollution incident affecting the Colin Glen River, and subsequently the River Lagan, at Dunmurry. Further to this investigation, proceedings on two counts were initiated against Northern Ireland Water under the Water (NI) Order 1999. Northern Ireland Water pleaded guilty in court in respect of both breaches and was fined £100, plus analysis costs of £186.10 and court costs of £25.

Northern Ireland Water has advised me that it takes any issue of pollution very seriously and is investing £1m per day to upgrade water and wastewater services up to the highest possible standard.

I will continue to make sure that we provide the investment needed to improve our environment. However, where pollution occurs and there are prosecutions this shows that the regulatory system is working properly, with Northern Ireland Water being treated in the same way as any other discharger.

Waste Water Laboratory

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether or not the waste water laboratory at Altnagelvin will be closed. (AQW 4349/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it has no plans to close the wastewater laboratory at Altnagelvin. Indeed, the laboratory has recently been extended to provide increased capacity for the analysis of wastewater samples.

Waste Water Laboratory

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether or not the staffing level, at January 2008, will be reduced at the waste water laboratory at Altnagelvin. (AQW 4350/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that its operational plan and budget for 2008-09 envisages reductions in staffing levels for most of its functional areas including two posts from the laboratory at Altnagelvin.

Waste Water Laboratory

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment he has made of the impact on performance standards at the waste water laboratory at Altnagelvin of a reduction in current staffing levels. (AQW 4351/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it does not anticipate that the reduction of two posts at the wastewater laboratory at Altnagelvin, which are currently filled by temporary staff, will impact on performance standards. Any future reduction in staffing levels will be assessed carefully in terms of meeting regulatory compliance and performance levels.

Waste Water Laboratory

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm that existing staff at the waste water laboratory at Altnagelvin were advised that no staffing cuts would be made before 2010. (AQW 4352/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that no commitment has been given to keep staffing at the

wastewater laboratory at Altnagelvin at current levels until 2010. Staff are aware of the reductions envisaged by NIW's operational plan and budget for 2008-09. The performance of the Altnagelvin laboratory will be reviewed in 2010. This will include a benchmarking exercise to compare the operational efficiency of NIW laboratories with similar organisations.

Pay and Display Car Parks

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total amount of finance raised through pay and display car parks in 2007; and to confirm if this money was used to create additional, affordable car park spaces. (AQW 4379/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service officials advise that £3.89 million was received through Pay and Display car-parking charges in the period January 2007 – December 2007.

Revenue generated by all car-park charges are used, with income from Penalty Charge Notices, to supplement the overall financing of Roads Service by central government.

Regional Development Strategy

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the action he is taking; and (ii) timeframe he is working to, in relation to reviewing the Regional Development Strategy. (AQO 2242/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: A 5 Year focused assessment of the Regional Development Strategy has been completed and is being discussed with the Regional Development Committee. I propose to publish the report by the summer after discussion with Executive colleagues.

I believe that it is vital that we undertake a more fundamental review to take account of the Programme for Government and to assist in the implementation of our Investment Strategy. This proposal is also being discussed with the Regional Development Committee. I will subsequently be discussing this more fundamental review with Executive colleagues and will then inform the Assembly.

Residents' Parking Permits

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a timescale in which he intends to introduce residents' parking permits. (AQO 2158/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service finalised the policy for introducing residents' parking schemes in January

2008. Preliminary work is currently underway to allow for the introduction of schemes in a number of areas in Belfast and Derry.

Consideration is being given to schemes in the following general areas:

Belfast

- The Markets Area (west of Cromac Street)
- Sandy Row
- John Street / Hamill Street
- Brown's Square
- Donegall Pass

Derry

- Bogside
- City Centre South

The scheme design process in these areas has commenced and this will involve conducting surveys, consultation with residents, finalisation of scheme designs, and subject to the support of the local communities, commencement of the necessary legislative process.

This is a significant undertaking and I understand the legislative process itself may take up to 12 months to complete. It is likely, therefore, that it will be sometime in 2009 before the first schemes will be operational.

Traffic Congestion

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline how he plans to address the traffic congestion currently affecting the M2 and Sandyknowes roundabout. (AQO 2200/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The road works presently being undertaken on the M2 involve the widening of the Belfast-bound carriageway between Sandyknowes and Greencastle junctions, widening the country-bound carriageway over the Greencastle Interchange and the replacement of the Hightown, Collin and Longlands Bridges.

This scheme is specifically designed to relieve congestion on this section of the M2, especially in the morning and evening peak periods. As you will appreciate it is not possible to undertake major road works of this scale without causing some disruption.

However, there are a number of measures in place to reduce the impact of this scheme on the M2 and the Sandyknowes Roundabout, while works are progressing. These include:

- maintaining 2 lanes of traffic in each direction on the M2;

- providing a free breakdown recovery service and restricting the contractor from closing roads at busy times; and
- while works are progressing on the replacement of the Hightown Bridge, the provision of traffic signals at the Scullions Road/ Sandyknowes junction, a traffic monitoring camera on Scullions Road as well as an emergency breakdown vehicle recovery service for Sandyknowes Roundabout at peak traffic times during the period of the bridge closure.

I can assure Members that Roads Service officials will continue to actively monitor traffic conditions on the M2 and Sandyknowes Roundabout and will, if appropriate, introduce additional measures to address the traffic congestion.

I can also advise that following the endorsement of the Investment Strategy 2008 - 2018 by the Assembly, work on the assessment of an expanded Strategic Road Improvement Programme is at an advanced stage. One of the proposals under consideration is the A8(M) / M2 Sandyknowes Junction Improvement scheme.

This scheme would provide a direct link road from the A8 (M) to the M2, eliminating the delay at Sandyknowes Roundabout for the Larne to Belfast traffic and thus also reducing traffic congestion on the roundabout for the other traffic movements.

Light-Rail Transport System

Mr McCausland asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the W.S. Atkins study on the potential for a light rapid transit system for Belfast. (AQO 2211/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The feasibility study for a pilot rapid transit system for Belfast has been concluded and I am currently considering its findings and recommendations. Once that has been completed I intend to discuss the way forward with members of the Regional Development Committee and with Executive colleagues.

Enterprise Rail Link

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development whether or not he has made an assessment of the number of passengers using the Belfast to Dublin Enterprise rail link, including those who board/alight at every stop. (AQO 2134/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Passenger numbers attributed to the Enterprise service are those actually travelling across the border irrespective of which stations they board or alight at. During the year to March 2007, some 861,000 people

used the Enterprise to travel across the border. This compares with 819,000 passenger journeys in the year to March 2006 and 837,000 passenger journeys in the year to March 2005.

Light-Rail Transport System

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the progress that has been made to develop a light rail transport system for Belfast. (AQO 2198/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I refer you to the previous answer AQO 2211 (10).

I have now received the feasibility study for a pilot rapid transit system for Belfast which includes the most appropriate technology for Belfast. I am currently considering the findings contained within the report and anticipate discussing the way forward with members of the Regional Development Committee and colleagues in the Executive in the near future.

Dual Carriageway Project

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the preparatory work being carried out on the Derry/Londonderry - Aghnacloy dual carriageway project co-funded by the Government of the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 2139/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has commissioned consultants to undertake a route corridor study for the dualling of the A5 from Derry to the border at Aghnacloy. It is anticipated that a preliminary options report which will recommend a preferred corridor will be completed by late 2008. Subsequent work should enable the identification of a preferred route within that corridor by mid 2009.

Enterprise Rail Link

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any discussions that have taken place with Iarnród Éireann to plan improvements in the Enterprise service between Belfast and Dublin, including new rolling stock and improvements to the permanent way. (AQO 2199/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Discussions have taken place between NIR and Iarnród Éireann over a number of years in respect of potential upgrades to the Belfast-Dublin rail service. In February 2006 NIR and Iarnród Éireann agreed a forward development strategy for the Enterprise

service, recognising the long-term aspiration to improve journey times and service frequencies. The North-South Ministerial Council in December 2007 asked officials to assess the options and prepare a Business Case for consideration at the next Transport meeting in May 2008.

Larne to Belfast Railway Line

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of passengers who have travelled on the Larne to Belfast railway line in each of the last three years. (AQO 2151/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: There were 1.8 million passenger journeys on the Larne line in 2004/05, £1.5 million in 2005/06 and £1.7 million in 2006/07.

Passenger journeys fell in 2005/06 because of a disruption to service caused by a major track re-lay. Since the re-opening of the line in February 2006, passenger numbers have grown steadily and are now on target to carry a record 1.9 million passengers this year.

Portadown Railway Station

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline plans for the completion of refurbishments to Portadown railway station. (AQO 2128/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink is currently in the preliminary stages of a project to refurbish Portadown Station and is in the process of appointing professional advisors to develop and assess viable options. While plans for the scheme will be developed over the next few years the budget does not include funding for construction. It is hoped that this can be secured for the period following March 2011 as part of the next Spending Review.

New Road Bridge

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment he has made of the benefits to be accrued from the construction of a new road bridge link from Narrow Water, near Newry; and to detail the amount that has been budgeted for this initiative. (AQO 2123/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: At a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, held on 14 September 2007, the Council noted the Irish Government's proposal for the construction of a bridge at Narrow Water linking Co Louth with Co Down and that the Irish Government has granted funding to

Louth County Council to undertake preliminary technical work on the proposal. The benefits to be accrued from this project will be appraised as part of the technical study.

There will be no financial input from Roads Service to this work.

My Department's Roads Service has employed consultants to undertake a local transport study of the southern part of Newry to assess the impact of a Southern Relief Road scheme. This study will identify a possible route corridor and explore other options to relieve traffic congestion in this part of the city and help traffic from Warrenpoint access the A1 Key Transport Corridor.

It has been agreed that the results from these studies will be made available to both Road Authorities.

All-Ireland Port at Bremore

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment he has made of the potential impact on Northern Ireland ports of an all-Ireland port at Bremore. (AQO 2131/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am aware that consideration is being given to development of port facilities at Bremore.

Ports in the north make their own assessments of the commercial opportunities and threats that they face. I would expect them to make such assessments in respect of any plans that emerge for Bremore.

Rathlin Island

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to give a timescale within which he will initiate the special island policy for Rathlin Island, including the timescale for implementation and rollout. (AQO 2217/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department is currently working to develop the central government island policy for Rathlin. A cross-Departmental group has been set up and has met to consider the range of issues involved. I will be meeting representatives from the island in the near future to explore their views on the priorities to be addressed, and that information will be taken on board in developing the policy. Until that stage has been reached, I am not in a position to comment on the timescale for future action.

A2 Road Widening Scheme

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the A2 road widening scheme between Seapark and Silverstream Banks in Carrickfergus. (AQO 2180/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service held a public inquiry in October 2007 into its proposals for a major works scheme on the A2 at Shore Road, Greenisland. The Inspectors' report on the inquiry was forwarded to Roads Service on 22 January 2008.

Roads Service is currently considering the contents of the report with a view to producing a Departmental Statement on its proposals for progressing the scheme.

It is presently anticipated that the Statement will be published in the autumn of this year.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Housing Needs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the criteria used by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to establish housing needs of applicants experiencing (i) physical; and (ii) mental, disabilities. (AQW 3916/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): A detailed housing needs assessment is carried out for all applicants for social housing. Where necessary a Health and Social Wellbeing assessment is undertaken. In addition points can be awarded to applicants in recognition of a wide range of health and social factors relevant to each individual's circumstances.

For those applicants who have additional care needs a more detailed assessment is undertaken by a Housing Support Officer/Welfare Officer who also looks at various housing options such as:

- adapting or extending the current dwelling
- transfer within the social housing stock
- consideration for a new build scheme (including any specific design requirements to reflect the applicant's needs)
- the provision of support services and/or
- an allocation to a specialist supported housing scheme.

In very exceptional circumstances where all potential housing options are exhausted, consideration will be given to the purchase of a dwelling appropriate to the needs of the applicant provided it meets the standards set out in the Housing Association Guide.

In the event that the applicant is threatened with homelessness, the needs identified will be considered in deciding the most appropriate form of temporary accommodation to be offered. Care will be taken to balance the needs of the applicant in terms of the physical layout and location of the accommodation.

Doury Road Estate

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Social Development to provide a list of every street in the Doury Road Estate; and to detail, in each street, the number of houses that are owned (i) by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; (ii) by Housing Associations; or (iii) privately. (AQW 4002/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is listed in the table below. There are no Housing Association properties in the area.

Street Name	Northern Ireland Housing Executive Properties	Private Properties
Holland Park	11	17
Richmond Park	29	17
Regents Park	13	2
Wayside Green	4	0
Doury Park	2	2
Sandown Park	28	9
Kensington Park	4	0
Kew Link	4	2
Kew Gardens	16	1
Hyde Park	12	0
Camberwell Way	8	7
Victoria Park	10	11
Chiswick Walk	0	12
Alexandra Park	0	9
Windsor Walk	1	3
	142	92

Eco-Schemes for Social Housing

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the incentives that exist in relation to eco-schemes for social housing. (AQW 4007/08)

The Minister for Social Development: All new social houses constructed after 1st April 2008 must

comply with the 3 star level of the Code for Sustainable Homes. Currently additional grant funding is available to Housing Associations to assist with the cost of the works required to achieve the very good and excellent EcoHome standards. This will ensure that new social housing is as eco-friendly as can be reasonably achieved at present.

Social Housing

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of eco-schemes that have been processed for social housing in the last two years. (AQW 4008/08)

The Minister for Social Development: No 'eco-schemes' have been processed for social housing in the last 2 years. However, 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.

As indicated in my statement of 26 February 2008 on the New Housing Agenda for Northern Ireland, the former Grosvenor Barracks site will also house Northern Ireland's first ever eco village.

Communication Access

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development 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 4015/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My department takes seriously the provision of services to deaf and hard of hearing customers. The Department accommodates the use of text messaging and e-mail to transact business. Induction loop systems are available in public offices and portable loop systems are also accessible. Minicom and textphones are used and the Department embraces the use of telecommunications technology services to aid communication with this important client group. Information about the facilities available is publicised on the internet, in signage in local offices and advice is included in various publications for customers.

Fuel Poverty

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of pensioner households currently living in fuel poverty; and (ii) the proportion of fuel poor households that are occupied by persons

aged (a) 65 years and over; and (b) 75 years and over.
(AQW 4022/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The most recent figures available are from the 2004 Interim House Condition Survey. The figures used are for those pensioners aged 60 years and over rather than 65 years and over as women can claim retirement pension from age 60.

1. Number of pensioner households living in fuel poverty was approximately 72,000.
2. The proportion of fuel poor households aged (a) 60 years or more was 34% (b) 75 years or more was 20%

Figures emerging from the 2006 House Conditions Survey will be available in the summer.

Energy Performance Certificates

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Social Development to provide a timescale for the introduction of Energy Performance Certificates as part of Home Information Packs. (AQW 4101/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Home Information Packs will not be introduced in Northern Ireland. However, 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.

Jobs and Benefits Office

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the reasons for the withdrawal of planning application I/2007/0523/F, related to the erection of a new Jobs and Benefits office on Fairhill Road, Cookstown. (AQW 4105/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Social Security Agency remains committed to the roll-out of a Jobs and Benefits service in Cookstown to ensure that clients benefit from the same enhanced work focused service which is available elsewhere in Northern Ireland. Whilst a planning application was submitted for a new office on the existing site at Fairhill Road, Cookstown, Roads Service raised a number of issues regarding the level of on-site car parking which could be provided. 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

Economy 7 Heating

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive tenants who still have Economy 7 heating in their homes. (AQW 4111/08)

The Minister for Social Development: There are currently 11,612 Northern Ireland Housing Executive tenants using Economy 7 electric heating systems. It is NIHE's policy to replace Economy 7 heating in areas where heating replacement is being undertaken and gas or oil is a technically practical alternative.

Equality Impact Assessment

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the reasons why she did not instruct her department to carry out an equality impact assessment on the Girdwood site, North Belfast. (AQW 4156/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Girdwood site is to be developed as part of a wider site which includes the former Crumlin Road Gaol. The regeneration and redevelopment of this combined site is being taken forward on the basis of an integrated masterplan for which I announced a 14-week period of public consultation on 16 October 2007 and which ended on 22 January 2008.

In June 2007 the draft masterplan was examined by officials in consultation with the Department's Equality Officer to determine what was required under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Given the conceptual nature of the document, and the fact that the outlined proposals are simply illustrative of the potential usage of the site, it was considered unnecessary, at that time, to carry out a screening exercise.

Following consideration of the responses to the public consultation a final masterplan containing proposals for the Crumlin Road Gaol/Girdwood Park site will be prepared. At that stage, firmer proposals underpinning the future development of the site will be set out. A screening exercise will then be carried out and an Equality Impact Assessment undertaken, if appropriate.

Travellers' Sites

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development what consideration she has given to

amending existing (i) legislation; and (ii) working practices, in relation to the positioning of (a) serviced; and (b) temporary halting, travellers' sites, to ensure that a greater geographical spread is maintained.

(AQW 4174/08)

The Minister for Social Development: There is no legislation which provides for the location of Travellers sites. Traveller sites are provided where there is a need; available land; and planning permission.

There is currently a good geographical spread of sites across Northern Ireland namely in Belfast, Craigavon, Derry, Strabane, Omagh and Dungannon. In cases of over use of sites Traveller families are encouraged to move on to a more suitable location.

Pomeroy Developments Project

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm (i) whether or not grant funding has been (a) offered; or (b) provided, to the Pomeroy Developments Project; (ii) when any offer was made; and (iii) the conditions applying to any funding.

(AQW 4191/08)

The Minister for Social Development: (i) (a) The Department for Social Development, working in partnership with the International Fund for Ireland, has approved a CRISP Programme in Pomeroy. As part of the CRISP Programme, a total of £673,050 has been allocated by DSD and IFI to the core project – a £1.2 million Business Park being developed by Pomeroy Development Projects Ltd. (£336,525 each from DSD and IFI). (b) Of this, £41,019 has been spent to date, leaving a balance of £632,031.

(ii) The Contract for Funding was issued on 27 November, 2007.

(iii) The Contract for Funding is the standard document for CRISP Core Projects, and contains no special conditions or requirements. However, as is standard, it does stipulate that the entire funding package must be in place and that the scheme has planning permission.

Fuel Oil Tanks

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to undertake an urgent review of (i) the siting; and (ii) the security, of fuel oil tanks located in Northern Ireland Housing Executive homes, in light of recent serious fires due to the vandalism and subsequent arson attacks related to fuel oil tanks. (AQW 4297/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Building Regulations, which also

incorporate the Oil Firing Technical Association (OFTEC) Regulations, require oil tanks to be located a minimum of 1.8 metres away from the dwelling and at least 760mm from the boundary of the property.

Where these minimum standards cannot be achieved then resisting barriers need to be provided. I am advised that the siting of all oil tanks at Housing Executive homes complies with the Regulations.

As far as security is concerned, with effect from 2007 all oil tanks provided by the Housing Executive are PVC double skinned tanks with a facility for locking.

Andersonstown Road Public Realm Scheme

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the steps she is taking to (i) reconsider her department's decision on the Andersonstown Road public realm scheme; and (ii) begin the scheme as soon as possible.

(AQW 4298/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Andersonstown Road is a key project in my Department's programme of public realm schemes. There was uncertainty around when works on the scheme could begin while future years budgets were being finalised. Now that the budget is agreed my officials will be prioritising my Department's programme of spend in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas over the next 3 years (2008-2011). On completion of that work I will then decide when the scheme in Andersonstown will commence.

Replacement Schemes

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development to give details of (i) window replacement schemes; (ii) external maintenance schemes; and (iii) kitchen replacement schemes, in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive Dairyfarm office, Lisburn, over the next year.

(AQW 4301/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive does not operate Window Replacement Schemes. Where they require replacement, windows are replaced as an integral part of External Cyclical Maintenance (ECM) schemes. One such ECM scheme planned for the 152 properties in the Woodside area but the inspection of the windows in that area has indicated very little window replacement is required. The contractor will take possession of the site in March 2008,

A kitchen replacement scheme is ongoing in the Glenkeen Estate leaving only the Glenbawn and Ardcaoin Estates in the whole of Twinbrook and Poleglass requiring attention. These are currently scheduled for 2010 and 2012 respectively.

Youth Services

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the existing funding provided by her department for youth services within Belfast, that will be due to run out in March 2008.

(AQO 2193/08)

The Minister for Social Development: A total of £219,192 of funding is being provided by my Department to projects delivering youth services across Belfast. The funding in respect of these services is scheduled to end in March 2008.

Free School Meals

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to develop a more streamlined data-sharing arrangement with the Department of Education, aimed at maximising the uptake of free school meals, and other allowances.

(AQO 2112/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The sharing of personal data is governed by the Data Protection Act 1998 which requires that “Personal data shall be processed fairly and lawfully...”. Until appropriate legislation is in place, the Department is unable to share personal information directly with the Department of Education. Officials of both Departments are currently seeking to address this matter.

Child Support Agency

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the steps she is taking to recover debts, in relation to the Child Support Agency, that have been outstanding for up to 15 years. (AQO 2146/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The recovery of debt is key to the Child Support Agency’s Operational Improvements, as is an increased focus on parents who fail to meet their financial responsibilities. A range of powers to pursue debt are available to the organisation and are deployed by the Agency and I intend introducing new legislation with proposals to enhance the existing powers.

Disadvantaged Areas

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of working class/disadvantaged areas that she has visited since taking up office. (AQO 2120/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I put a high priority on seeing for myself the work that my department is supporting across the community. Disadvantage is no respecter of community or cultural background and the work being undertaken on housing and in supporting disadvantaged communities across Northern Ireland features prominently in my visits programme. Since taking office I have been able to visit more than 50 areas that might be described as disadvantaged, these include neighbourhood renewal areas, districts involved in my department’s Areas at Risk programme and communities outside those initiatives.

Positive Steps Report

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development to provide a timeframe for implementing the recommendations arising from the Positive Steps report into the future of the community sector.

(AQO 2246/08)

The Minister for Social Development: As Minister for Social Development I Chair the cross-Departmental Implementation Group established to take forward the commitments made in Positive Steps: The Government’s response to Investing Together: Report of the Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector. This is to ensure a co-ordinated Government response to the commitments set out in Positive Steps to support change and investment in the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. The actions set a clear agenda for investment and transformation and an extra £23 million was made available to 2009 to help support this process. The Positive Steps Implementation Report “Evaluating Progress” was published on the departmental website in March 2007. This evaluation report shows that Government has made significant progress to date on many of the commitments:

The new Charities Legislation is passing through the Assembly; The Community Investment Fund has provided an investment of £5 million over 3 years to support community development work ; DSD is supporting change in the sector through the £18m Modernisation Fund (£3 million revenue and £15 million for capital projects); Best practice on finance and governance has been documented, endorsed by DFP, and disseminated across both Government and the Sector; Guidance on financial reserves policies by VCS organisations has been produced and disseminated across government by DFP; The matter of Dormant Accounts is being progressed in line with policy and legislation in Westminster, and NI will be included in a Bill on unclaimed assets.

Positive Steps set a challenging agenda for change. We are working with our colleagues in DFP and the sector to address other issues around the burden of audit and more complex funding issues, such as Lead Funder and Full Cost Recovery. I expect to receive a final progress report by December 2008, with Departments indicating where they have fully delivered on Positive Steps commitments, or that clear, agreed action plans are in place to deliver on them.

Social Housing

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the discussions she has had with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in relation to the provision of social housing in the Carrickfergus area. (AQO 2179/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have not held any discussions with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in relation to the provision of social housing in the Carrickfergus area.

Housing in the Village Area of South Belfast

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the steps she is taking to improve the standard of housing in the Village area of South Belfast. (AQO 2194/08)

The Minister for Social Development: A dual approach will be adopted to address the problems facing the people in the Village area. 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 Northern Ireland 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 A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to list the specific bids made by her within this year's Budget and in-year monitoring rounds, in relation to the regeneration of the Village area, South Belfast. (AQO 2093/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The proposals for the Village area, which are being examined, involve major redevelopment and major expenditure which is currently costed at around £200

million. I made bids in the Comprehensive Spending Review to take forward the proposals in the economic appraisal prepared for the Village area.

Hostel Accommodation

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of applicants for public sector housing from Belfast District 2, and Castlereagh District, that were offered hostel accommodation, due to appropriate housing not being available, in each of the years 2003/2004, 2004/2005 and 2005/2006. (AQO 2178/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Information on the numbers of applicants offered temporary accommodation has been placed in the Assembly Library

Housing Needs

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Social Development whether or not the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is planning to review the potential housing needs of older people, in light of demographic changes. (AQO 2197/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The housing needs of elderly people are regularly considered in the context of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's annual assessment of housing need. This assessment is projected forward five years and is used to help formulate the social new build programme.

Expenditure Incurred

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail any expenditure her department has incurred in relation to media training, wardrobe and hairdressing for the Minister. (AQO 2245/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have undertaken media training at a cost of £650 plus VAT to my Department. There has been no expenditure by my Department in relation to wardrobe and hairdressing.

Housing Affordability

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an overview of the report of the expert panel appointed to examine issues of housing affordability. (AQO 2114/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I plan to make a formal statement to the Assembly tomorrow on the progress I have made on my Affordability Review.

Simple Recommendations

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to implement the Simple recommendations on 20% of private developments being social housing. (AQO 2176/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This is an issue that my Affordability Review Group and Expert Panel have carefully considered. I will be making a formal statement to the Assembly tomorrow when I shall go into greater detail on this.

Pomeroy Developments Project

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Social Development whether or not the department has offered, or provided, any finance to the Pomeroy Developments Project. (AQO 2177/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department for Social Development, working in partnership with the International Fund for Ireland, has approved a CRISP Project in Pomeroy. As part of the CRISP project, a total of £673,050 has been allocated by DSD and IFI to the core project – a £1.2 million Business Park being developed by Pomeroy Development Projects Ltd. (£336,525 each from DSD and IFI). Of this, £41,019 has been spent to date, leaving a balance of £632,031.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 7 March 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

West Tyrone Voice

Mr Elliott asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answer to AQW 272/08, to detail the funding made available to 'West Tyrone Voice', in each of the last 10 financial years. (AQW 3810/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): Records show that funding available to West Tyrone Voice between April 1998 and March 2007 was £820,085. A year by year breakdown of these figures is not currently available.

In addition this group may also have applied for funding from other programmes or schemes, such as the District Council Community Relations Programme or European Union funding through the Local Strategy Partnerships, we do not hold this information.

Derry and Raphoe Action

Mr Elliott asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answer to AQW 272/08, to detail the funding made available to 'Derry & Raphoe Action', in each of the last 10 financial years. (AQW 3811/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Records show that funding available to 'Derry & Raphoe Action' between April 1998 and March 2007 was £347,229. A year by year breakdown of these figures is not currently available.

In addition this group may also have applied for funding from any other programmes or schemes, such as the District Council Community Relations Programme

or European Union funding through the Local Strategy Partnerships, we do not hold this information.

Written Questions

Mr Ross asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of written Assembly questions answered each month, since May 2007. (AQW 4097/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The number of written Assembly Questions answered each month since May 2007 is as follows:

Month	Number
May 2007	1
June 2007	29
July 2007	26
August 2007	14
September 2007	10
October 2007	27
November 2007	22
December 2007	32
January 2008	30
February 2008*	38
Total	229

* This figure comprises replies up to and including 22 February 2008.

Planning Appeals Commission

Mr T Clarke asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the steps that are being taken to address the pressures on the Planning Appeals Commission. (AQO 2320/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are fully committed to addressing pressures on the Planning Appeals Commission and have committed within the Public Service Agreement to deliver increased resources to enable the Planning Appeals Commission to address the backlog of appeal cases. As a result additional funding has been made available both in year and through the Budget 2008-11.

The amount of receipts which may be retained by the Commission has been increased from £150,000 to £241,000 within the current financial year and the Commission's budget allocation has been increased by over half a million pounds in each of the next three financial years resulting in a budget of £2.368m in 2008-09, £2.378m in 2009-10 and £2.396m in 2010-11. In addition the amount of receipts which the Commission may retain has increased from £241,000 to £376,000 per annum in each of these years. This

will provide an overall increase of up to £1.973m in the Commission's spending power over the next three years.

This extra funding will enable the Chief Commissioner to strengthen and expand the existing capacity of the Commission to address the existing workload and associated backlog of planning appeals. Plans are already in place to recruit a further 6 part time call-off panel commissioners and 6 permanent full-time commissioners.

Commissioner for Older Persons

Mr McCarthy asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the progress made on the appointment of a Commissioner for Older Persons. (AQO 2285/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The appointment of an Older People's Commissioner is a key priority for us and officials will endeavour to prioritise the process where possible.

In order to assist in developing proposals for the specific remit of the Office, a number of consultation events are currently being organised, one in Cookstown and two further events in Belfast and Londonderry.

A report, which will include options on the possible role and remit of a Commissioner, taking account of the outcome of consultations will be presented to us later this month. Following this, Officials will draft proposals for the remit of the Commissioner and members of the public will be consulted on this.

We are keen to ensure that momentum towards the establishment of an Older People's Commissioner is not lost and are currently finalising interim arrangements, details of which will be announced shortly and conveyed to the OFMDFM Committee and this Assembly.

Child Poverty

Mr Lunn asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the targets it will set in order to reduce child poverty. (AQO 2259/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Within Programme for Government 2008-2011 we have set challenging targets;

- To work towards the elimination of severe child poverty by 2012 and;
- To work towards the elimination of child poverty in Northern Ireland by 2020 and reducing child poverty by 50% by 2010.

Tackling Poverty and Social Inclusion which affects the most vulnerable in our society will require co-ordinated action across all Departments and further interim targets will be developed in conjunction with Departments to reduce child poverty.

Anti-Racism Strategy

Mr A Maskey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the anti-racism strategy. (AQO 2387/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Executive's primary focus is on building a shared and better future for all people living here, both new and host communities. We are committed to building and shaping a society that is free of both racism and other forms of intolerance. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is currently working on bringing forward detailed proposals for a 'Programme of Cohesion, Sharing and Integration for a Shared and Better Future.' This programme will build on some of the excellent work, particularly by district councils and community organisations, to address the challenges which local communities are facing. Action to tackle both racism and sectarianism will be at the core of these proposals.

This programme will focus on local people dealing with local issues through their own local solutions.

We will bring forward these proposals for discussion with the Committee of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Social Cohesion

Mr Bresland asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm that funding for a programme of social cohesion will be significantly increased over the next three years.

(AQO 2318/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: As I 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.

The Budget recognises that the past 3 years have seen significant progress in improved relationships, with historically low levels of violence and tension.

We want to ensure that improved relationships within the whole community continue and we want to address the challenges that face new and host communities. The expenditure on good relations and good race relations in the past 3 years is approx £21 million.

Within the budget we will increase this investment to ensure continued improvement in relationships and to address the challenges facing new and host communities by almost £7.5m over the next 3 years.

Total investment between 2008/09 and 2010/11 will therefore be approximately £28.7m, (taking account of efficiencies over the period) to meet the PSA target of building a shared and better future for all.

Freedom of Information Act

Mr McCallister asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether or not consideration is being given to extending the operation of the Freedom of Information Act to include bodies not presently covered by the Act. (AQO 2266/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The extension of the operation of the Freedom of Information Act to new public bodies is provided for routinely, either by the legislation that establishes the new body, or by an Order made by the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice following consultation with the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Furthermore, the Freedom of Information Act provides that publicly-owned companies are covered by its provisions from their inception.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice may also make an Order to extend the Freedom of Information Act to bodies which exercise functions of a public nature or to contractors who provide services which are a function of a public body. A three-month public consultation carried out by the Ministry of Justice regarding such an extension concluded on 1st February 2008. Should the Ministry of Justice decide to make such an Order, then a further consultation would occur with those organisations likely to be affected by the Order, accompanied by a full impact assessment of the coverage.

Victims' Commissioners

Mr A Maginness asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the legal advice it received in relation to the appointment of four Victims' Commissioners. (AQO 2316/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We took legal advice from the Departmental Solicitors

Office on the concept of appointing four Commissioners for Victims and Survivors.

Eames/Bradley Consultative Group

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the representations it plans to make to the Eames/Bradley consultative group on the past. (AQO 2299/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Officials met with the Consultative Group on the Past in October 2007. The Consultative Group asked to meet with us. These meetings took place in January 2008. The meetings were largely a listening exercise and no conclusions have been reached at this stage.

Capital Realisations Task Force

Mr O'Dowd asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm whether or not the Capital Realisations Taskforce report will take account of any recommendations emerging from the review of the location of public sector jobs. (AQO 2376/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Capital Realisations Taskforce report focuses on how best to realise the value of underutilised or surplus public sector assets. We recognise the existing regional infrastructure disparities. We will work to address them and to ensure that we deliver a more balanced regional outcome, including within the out-workings of asset realisation.

Civic Forum

Mr Moutray asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the analysis it has made of the replies it has received from former members of the Civic Forum to the department's consultation exercise. (AQO 2264/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Following the restoration of devolution in May 2007, the members of the Civic Forum were consulted about their availability and willingness to serve, in an interim capacity, if it were decided to reconvene the Forum during the review period.

Forty-nine of the original 60 members of the Forum were consulted. Of the other 11, 6 had been appointees of the former First Minister and deputy First Minister and there were 5 vacancies. Thirty-two members indicated unambiguously that they would be willing to return in an interim capacity. Of the remainder, 4

preferred to await the outcome of the review, 6 did not wish to return and 7 did not reply.

As well as considering individual members' responses, we also had to consider the extent to which those prepared to return would be sufficiently representative of the original sectors.

Although about half of the original members of the Forum were willing to serve while the review was underway, this was not representative of some of the smaller sectors and, given the short remaining lifespan of the existing Forum, it was decided not to recall the members but to concentrate instead on pressing ahead with the review.

Bill of Rights

Mrs M Bradley asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action it is taking to support the work of the Bill of Rights Forum; and to confirm that it is committed to delivering an extensive and inclusive Bill of Rights. (AQO 2389/08)

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.

Equality Legislation

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail its plans to assess the impact of equality legislation on the different communities in Northern Ireland. (AQO 2261/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland has a statutory responsibility under Schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to keep under review the effectiveness of duties imposed by Section 75 of the Act. The Commission is currently reviewing the effectiveness of Section 75; it published a draft report for consultation in May 2007 and a final report is due at the end of March 2008. The review includes a focus on the impact that the legislation has had across the nine Section 75 categories and on the development and implementation of public policy.

The Department has also been reviewing equality legislation in the context of the single Equality Bill process, and has identified some areas that need to be

addressed. Proposals will be brought to the Executive in due course.

The Department also views a range of statistical evidence in considering the impact of policy and legislation including: Equality Commission for Northern Ireland statistics on the monitored workforce; the Labour Force Survey Religion Report; various reports on the socio-economic conditions of the two communities; survey evidence of job applicants and appointees; and monitoring of the employment, unemployment and economic activity rates of different groups including religion, disability, gender and age.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Ruddock Review

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update on her department's implementation of the recommendations of the Ruddock review into the handling of the alpha-nortestosterone issue; particularly in relation to (i) on-farm searches; and (ii) developing best practice guidelines from the examination of approaches taken by other enforcement agencies. (AQW 4154/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Progress is well underway with all the recommendations of the Ruddock review of the handling of the alpha-nortestosterone issue. I can provide an update as follows:

Recommendation 1

Progress has been made on implementing the recommendation to provide scientific evidence which will allow interpretation of the legislation to be changed. There is now emerging recognition within the EU that alpha-nortestosterone is likely to occur naturally in injured or stressed male bovines. The European Community Reference Laboratory is expected to draft a guidance paper to reflect this position. Further scientific work to inform the evidence base in this area is expected to be completed by the end of March.

Recommendation 2 and 4

The recommendations that DARD should adopt a project management approach in order to improve policy development and implementation in the future, is also being progressed and I can advise that a team of key senior officials is being established, representing DARD, AFBI, the Food Standards Agency and the Departmental Solicitors Office. In the event of a residues emergency this team will facilitate a rapid response to findings

arising from emerging science and ensure policy development is initiated immediately.

Recommendation 3

You refer in particular to the recommendation concerning on-farm searches and our commitment to develop best practice. As I indicated in the Assembly on the 21st of January, my officials are currently reviewing and updating standard operating procedures and this work will be completed shortly.

Recommendation 5

Systems have been put in place to ensure that the recommendation to formally involve key stakeholders in strategic discussions in any future similar event is fully implemented.

Agriculture Industry

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of foreign nationals who are working (i) on farms; and (ii) in the agriculture industry. (AQW 4161/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department does not collect information on the numbers of foreign nationals employed on farms or in the Agriculture industry in the North. However, following the European Union Farm Structure Survey conducted in 2007 DARD estimated that some 541 farms employed personnel from outside of these islands over the period April 2006 to March 2007.

Bluetongue

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) to confirm that compensation measures are in place for those farmers who have lost cattle and business due to the recent bluetongue outbreak; and (ii) to detail the steps she has taken, following her statement on the 19 February 2008, to ensure that Northern Ireland remains disease-free. (AQW 4164/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As I explained to the Assembly on 19th February, my Department is under no obligation to pay any compensation for **imported** animals that have been affected by or exposed to the bluetongue virus.

This position has been made abundantly clear to the agriculture industry and the position is supported by industry leaders.

If the animal was **not imported** from another country, then compensation would be payable if the Department requires it to be slaughtered. In the case of such affected animals compensation is paid at 50 per cent of the value of the animal: if not affected the rate of compensation is 100 per cent.

No compensation is payable for loss of business.

In relation to the steps I have taken to ensure that the North remains disease free, the latest and most significant action was to suspend the imports of cattle over 12 months and sheep over 6 months from Bluetongue Zones. I took this action in response to emerging scientific evidence following the Bluetongue case in North Antrim.

I have also run an advertising campaign in the daily and farming press to ensure that everyone is aware of the dangers of importing livestock. This follows a public awareness campaign during 2006 when the Department issued posters and flyers to farmers and Private Veterinary Practitioners. At that time the Chief Veterinary Officer also wrote to all cattle and sheep owners in the North reminding them to be vigilant and to make them aware of the precautions they should take in relation to Bluetongue. The DARD website has also been regularly updated with information for the farming community, including advice and symptoms to look out for.

My own consistent message to farmers has been to think very carefully before importing livestock from Bluetongue infected areas and I have reiterated this message numerous times.

I have put in place a comprehensive surveillance programme to ensure that no other infected animals are present in the North. I have also sought veterinary advice on the level of testing post-import. As a result, in addition to the current post-import test 10 days after the animals comes in, a further test will be required after 30 days.

Overnight Accommodation

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the cost of overnight accommodation for her departmental officials, attending functions in an official capacity, (i) in total; (ii) in Northern Ireland; (iii) in the Republic of Ireland; (iv) in Great Britain; (v) in other EU countries; and (vi) elsewhere, in each of the past three years. (AQW 4208/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

ACCOMMODATION COSTS FOR ATTENDANCE AT FUNCTIONS IN:-

	NI	ROI	GB	Other EU Countries	Other Countries	Total Costs (£)
2004/5	£	£168	£1,033	£	£	£1,201
2005/6	£105	£76.50	£497	£1,246	£	£1,924.5
2006/7	£177	£1,015	£997	£2,813	£379	£5,381

Additional information:

The above information details expenditure on overnight accommodation for the core Department (excluding Agencies and Non-Departmental Public Bodies) and relates to functions organised by industry/private companies in the financial years 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07 where officials have attended to represent the Department. The figures exclude costs for attendance at training/personal development events.

The Department was unable to disaggregate expenditure incurred for a small number of functions where overnight accommodation has formed part of the overall costs for attendance at the event. These figures are not included in the above information.

Written Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of written questions she has answered in each month since May 2007. (AQW 4214/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: From May 2007 to 31 January 2008 I have answered a total of 247 written Assembly Questions. The breakdown by month is as follows –

May 2007	10
June 2007	22
July 2007	27
August 2007	NIL
September 2007	23
October 2007	55
November 2007	45
December 2007	38
January 2008	27

Bluetongue

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the advice she has received from the Chief Veterinary Officer concerning bluetongue disease. (AQW 4224/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have been in regular discussions with my Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) on Bluetongue since it became an issue for us. The advice I receive on any particular issues is based on the output of my Department's Strategy Group. That Strategy Group convenes in emergency/exceptional circumstances and is chaired by the Permanent Secretary, and attended by

senior officers and when required, those with specialist knowledge in the particular area. The advice I receive therefore takes account of the views of the CVO whose advice is incorporated within the advice from this group.

Bluetongue

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail how bluetongue infected stock were able to make it into the country if they were infected before transit. (AQW 4225/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: On 11th January a consignment of cattle arrived in the North from an export assembly centre in the Netherlands. All the animals had tested negative for the Bluetongue virus before leaving the Netherlands. They had been tested using the PCR test that detects virus in the blood. This testing was in accordance with the European regulations and all animals were able to be exported in line with EU intra-community trade conditions.

On arrival in the North they were restricted in the herd of destination until routine post-import tests were carried out 10 days after arrival, as is the case for all ruminant animals imported into the North from Bluetongue affected areas of the EU. At this point eight animals tested positive for the presence of antibodies on the Elisa test, although they all remained negative on the PCR test meaning that no virus was present in their blood. The negative PCR and eight positive Elisa tests showed that the animals had been affected by or exposed to Bluetongue virus in the past. As these were the first Elisa positive animals to be detected in the North on post-import testing, and as a precautionary measure, the restriction was maintained on these imported animals and they were retested 30 days post-import. It was at this test that active infection was detected in the blood of one animal. This animal had been PCR negative prior to import, Elisa negative and PCR negative on the first post-import test, and remained Elisa negative.

As you are aware this case is still under investigation and I would not make further comments until that investigation is complete.

Bluetongue

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm whether or not the decision to cull the livestock affected by bluetongue was made on the advice of the Chief Veterinary Officer. (AQW 4230/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The decision to cull livestock affected by Bluetongue was made by me. In reaching my decisions I took advice from my Department's Strategy Group which convenes in this type of circumstance. The Strategy Group is chaired by the Permanent Secretary and attended by senior officials, and when required, those with specialist knowledge in a particular area.

The group that provided information on culling livestock included the Chief Veterinary Officer and the Head of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) as well as other senior officials including the Senior Finance Officer.

Infectious Vectors

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm whether or not infectious vectors were found on livestock that could have caused the spread of bluetongue disease. (AQW 4236/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Regarding the recent case of Bluetongue in North Antrim, vector surveillance that was in place on the farm did not find vectors on or around the vicinity of the affected livestock at that time that could have caused the spread of Bluetongue virus. However, one midge was caught in a trap on the farm on the weekend of 23/24 February and has been sent to the Community Bluetongue Reference Laboratory at Pirbright for testing.

Farm Nutrient Management Scheme

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of pre-work inspections for Farm Nutrient Management Scheme projects that have yet to take place. (AQW 4242/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As at 25th February, 520 applicants to the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme had pre-approval inspections yet to be completed.

Single Farm Payments

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of Single Farm Payment entitlements her department has claimed back since the introduction of the scheme. (AQW 4247/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: For the 2005 scheme year, Single Farm Payment Entitlements to the value of €9,916.69 were confiscated because the usage rules were not met. For

the 2006 scheme, the value was €11,442.40. So far for 2007, the value is €8,116.24. The total value is €29,475.33, in respect of 208 entitlements, since the introduction of the scheme.

Single Farm Payments

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail how she intends to allocate monies received from unused Single Farm Payment entitlements claimed back by the department. (AQW 4249/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The value of Single Farm Payment entitlements returned to the National Reserve to-date, is less than €30,000.

The amount in the National Reserve, which might be attributed to the North, is estimated to be €330,000. This is needed to address unresolved cases, to meet revisions to entitlements already allocated and, subject to the outcome of consultation, for any new entitlements which need to be issued following reform to the CAP fruit and vegetable regime.

Consequently I have no other plans to introduce allocations from the National Reserve.

Animal Welfare

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the bodies and number of specialists who advise her on animal welfare. (AQW 4252/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I do not take advice on animal welfare directly from any bodies or specialists outside my Department and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute.

I do however, take advice from veterinary and scientific professionals in my Department and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute. I also consult with a wide range of stakeholders who have an interest and expertise in a wide range of animal welfare issues.

Foreign Imports

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the assistance she is giving to producer sectors, in order to address the impact that foreign imports, misleadingly labelled, are having on the sale of local produce. (AQW 4256/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Firstly, I must respond to your point about imported food being misleadingly labelled. My

Department is responsible for the labelling of beef and I can assure you that the legislation in this area is robustly enforced. The beef labelling rules require all operators in the supply chain, including retailers but excluding the food service sector, to label their beef with origin and traceability information. These rules apply equally to locally produced and imported beef. Regular inspections are carried out and appropriate enforcement action is taken where necessary. The labelling of other foods is the responsibility of the Food Standards Agency and is therefore outside my remit.

The labelling issue aside, I can assure you that I am committed to assisting the local agri-food industry to compete successfully in both domestic and export markets.

My Department is involved in a range of initiatives designed to increase business performance and success in the marketplace. I recently launched a new round of the Northern Ireland Regional Food Programme which aims to promote quality regional food and increase its consumption within Ireland and Britain. In the first phase of the programme over £300,000 was awarded to representative groups. Activities included the new Food Pavilion at the Balmoral Show and the Lough Neagh Food Festival, which showcased the wide range of quality local produce available.

At primary producer level, knowledge and technology transfer, industry training programmes, and benchmarking, all contribute to improving farm business performance and assisting farmers and growers to produce the quality of product demanded by an increasingly competitive marketplace.

My Department facilitates the EU Protected Food Names Scheme which provides a system for the protection of food names on a geographical or traditional recipe basis. Registered names are protected from imitation throughout the EU and should benefit from increased consumer awareness of regional and speciality foods. I can advise that my Department is currently progressing a number of applications under this Scheme.

The Livestock and Meat Commission (a Non-Departmental Public Body of DARD's) is responsible for the promotion of red meat and red meat products in both domestic and international markets. You should be aware, however, that EU State Aid rules place severe constraints on the use of Government funds for promotional activities both here and across the EU.

Bird Cover Projects

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm if there are threats to livestock or the environment in relation from

foreign ingredients used in DARD promoted birdcover projects. (AQW 4374/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The seed components of wild bird cover sown as Optional Habitats under the Countryside Management Scheme and the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme are not considered to be a threat to the environment or to livestock

Trawlermen's Trading Company

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, further to her meeting with the Northern Ireland Trawlermen's Trading Company, what action she is taking to address their concerns; and to detail the offers of assistance she has made to the Company. (AQW 4375/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I had a very helpful meeting with the Trawlermen's Trading Company and we discussed a range of issues around future financial support for the fleet including vessel modernisation and re-engining. My Departments proposals for financial support for the fishing industry will be contained in its European Fisheries Fund Investment Plan which will issue for consultation at the end of April. This coincides with the launch of similar documents in England, Scotland and Wales.

I explained to the delegation that I would be meeting with Commissioner Borg in April and I intended to use that opportunity to relay to him the concerns expressed by our fishermen and the difficulties being experienced because of escalating operating costs.

Communications Course

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm (i) if a screening exercise has been carried out in relation to an equality impact assessment on the proposed ending of the communications course at Loughry College; and (ii) if she will make the documentation regarding this screening exercise available to MLAs. (AQW 4579/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: No decisions have yet been taken on the proposal to end the Communications programme and a screening exercise in relation to the proposal has not yet been carried out.

Firm decisions on the proposal will be taken only when the full implications have been assessed, including consideration of equality implications. Papers can be released once the process is completed.

Single Farm Payments

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm that Single Farm Payments will not be paid to those entitled to payment, but who have indicated they prefer not to have the payment lodged in a bank or building society account. (AQO 2302/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: On 24 April 2007 my Department announced that, with effect from 1 March 2008, agriculture subsidy payments would only be paid electronically. This decision was taken in order to prepare for compliance with the European Commission's requirement that all subsidy payments should be made electronically, and in our case by Bankers Automated Clearing System (BACS) to a UK bank account, from 16 October 2008. However, recognising some farmers' concern, I announced recently that the date for introducing this change would be deferred until 1 May 2008. In doing so, I am ensuring that 2007 Single Farm Payments and 2008 Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowances payable up to the end of April will not be delayed for those not yet BACS compliant. After 1 May it is intended that no subsidies will issue unless my Department has been provided with the necessary bank details to facilitate electronic payment. I urge any farm business, that has not already provided bank details to my Department, does so as soon as possible. This information is essential as all future subsidy payments, including those relating to the 2008 Single Farm Payment Scheme, will only be made electronically to a UK bank/building society/credit union account through the BACS system.

Pig Industry

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail any discussions that have taken place with the pig industry in relation to the poor profitability within the sector. (AQO 2349/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Since my appointment as Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development I have had discussions with the industry on a number of occasions to find out more about the pig sector and the problems facing it. I am also planning to visit a pig farm very shortly. I remain deeply committed to supporting the industry and share the concerns of the pig sector at this difficult time.

At the beginning of September I contacted every supermarket in the North, expressing my concern about returns at producer level given the rising cost of feed prices and am aware that there has been a subsequent rise in some retail prices. I met the Ulster Pork and

Bacon Forum following which I agreed that my Department will co-fund, with industry stakeholders, a review of key issues impacting on the pig sector.

I met the senior management team of a leading pork processor and, following a meeting with industry representatives, I wrote to Defra and DAFF ministers to urge support for the re-introduction of export refunds which were subsequently reinstated.

I have had discussions with my Ministerial colleagues in health and education with a view to increasing the public procurement of locally produced pork and bacon. Under EU legislation, the procurement of food by public sector bodies cannot be restricted to specific locations or suppliers. In this respect the Department of Finance and Personnel's Central Procurement Directorate has a key role to play and has developed a range of guidance with the aim of increasing the participation of local enterprises in competition for Government business.

Of course, in addition to formal discussions with the industry, I have regular informal discussions with farmers and others on this subject and many others, as I travel around the North.

I will continue to work directly with representatives of the industry to see how we can progress together through the current difficulty, and my officials will continue to deal with farmers on an individual basis to discuss a range of issues, including areas of potential improvement in production efficiency on-farm.

Woodland Forests

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her plans to explore increased development of native woodland forests on an all-Ireland basis.

(AQO 2371/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: A Forestry Strategy was published by my Department in 2006, following two rounds of public consultation and an economic appraisal. The Strategy outlines key themes, one of which is a programme of afforestation, including the creation of new native woodland, that the Department will take forward through the 2007-2013 Rural Development Programme.

To date, good progress has been made in establishing native woodland in the North, 1,030 hectares having been established since 1998, over 40% of which has been created by private landowners with the assistance from the Woodland Grant Scheme and the remainder planted by Forest Service.

My officials also deal positively with their counterparts in the South on a range of forestry activities,

including the subject of native woodland. For example, the Native Woodland Group, established jointly by DARD Forest Service and DoE Environment and Heritage Service, includes representatives of Woodlands of Ireland and the South's National Parks and Wildlife Service. The Native Woodland Group also provides a representative to attend meetings of the Woodlands of Ireland Steering Committee. This provides a means by which technical, regulatory and other information relevant to native woodland development will continue to be shared on an all-Ireland basis. I am aware that the Native Woodland Scheme in the South has recently re-opened and my officials will continue to monitor this mechanism for support of native woodland creation. I will also consider further ways in which my forestry officials can co-operate with counterparts in the South on a range of forestry issues.

Farm Nutrient Management Scheme

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her plans to ensure that the maximum number of farmers benefit from the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme before the cut-off date. (AQO 2308/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I can advise that such plans have been in operation and that good progress has been made on inspections and in issuing grant approvals.

Last June, when I secured funding assurance to cover all applications to the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme (FNMS), my Department set a target to have pre-approval inspections completed this spring so that the maximum number of farmers could get an opportunity to benefit by the closing date. I am pleased to advise that some 4000 applicants have now had their pre approval inspection and approvals have issued to over 3,000 applicants.

Last June, pre approval inspections were still required on a balance of 2,800 applications. These were divided into three groups for pre approval inspections and the Department is now part way through processing the last group. The Department committed additional advisory and inspection staff to assist in the pre-approval process and so the effort has been put into the task.

During the period August to November 2007, I issued three News Releases updating progress on the processing of FNMS applications. In these I stressed the importance of farmers, who had already received their approval, getting their work completed.

I also encouraged those farmers who had their pre-approval inspections not to delay in getting information back to DARD so that their approvals

could be issued. The Department has monitored those cases who needed to get planning or other approvals and has kept in touch with the relevant bodies. Farmers should not delay asking for those necessary clearances.

Organic Action Plan Group

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to make a statement in relation to progress of the Organic Action Plan Group for Northern Ireland. (AQO 2289/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I met with representatives from the Organic Action Plan Group for NI in December 2007 when they updated me on their progress to date and the need to take stock of achievements and set the path for the next 3 years. Some of the Group's achievements include the production of a Market Study; holding an Organic Supply Chain Conference; detailed advice to the Department in relation to the introduction of a new Organic Farming Scheme and the Countryside Management Scheme 'Organic Option' under the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013; and, sponsorship of producer study visits to the South and to England. The group are currently finalising a consumer information leaflet and organic educational materials for schools.

Bog Meadows Nature Reserve

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the work undertaken by the Rivers Agency in the Bog Meadows nature reserve. (AQO 2329/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Rivers Agency was involved in a water recreation scheme in 1998/1999 in partnership with the Ulster Wildlife Trust and the Friends of the Bog Meadows for development of the Bog Meadows nature reserve, conservation and amenity site. The works mainly involved the excavation of the main pond to improve the wildlife amenity, re-aligning watercourses and improving access to the area. The Agency, which had a water recreation remit at that time, contributed approximately £30,000 to the scheme.

Rivers Agency has ongoing drainage maintenance functions on the designated section of the Ballymurphy Stream at this location and the inlet grille to the road culvert at the M1 motorway to ensure free flow and minimise the risk of flooding. In 2006 the Agency undertook substantial works to address flooding of the paths in the reserve from overtopping of the Ballymurphy Stream. These Agency works on the designated watercourse also facilitated the Ulster Wildlife Trust,

in their opening up of an undesignated watercourse which had become silted.

Annual maintenance works on the Ballymurphy Stream, which included clearance of the channel, were undertaken in October 2007.

Forest Service

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether or not there are any plans to de-centralise the Forest Service out of Belfast.

(AQO 2345/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Forest Service's HQ is located in Dundonald House. However, the majority of staff are already decentralised, working from District Offices at Castlewellsan, Enniskillen and Garvagh and a number of small operational bases throughout the North. At present, there are no plans to relocate the HQ outside of Belfast.

Northern Ireland Products

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the steps she is taking to promote Northern Ireland products, such as Portavogie prawns, Comber potatoes and Glastry ice cream.

(AQO 2342/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am committed to supporting quality local produce as I believe that we have access to some of the best natural ingredients in the world.

I have recently launched the new round of the NI Regional Food Programme which aims to promote quality regional food and increase its consumption within the island of Ireland and Britain. Under this programme assistance is available to develop and expand profitable and sustainable markets by encouraging better co-operation and communications between all sectors of the food industry.

The programme in past 12 months has provided financial support to a range of successful events, such as the Lough Neagh Food Festival, which showcased the wide range of quality local produce available.

The European Union Protected Food Names scheme provides a system for the protection of food names on a geographical or traditional recipe basis. Under this system, a named food or drink registered at European level is given protection against imitation throughout the European Union. This may in turn help them to take advantage of the wider markets that are arising from consumers' increasing awareness of the importance of regional and speciality foods.

Applications for the scheme may only be submitted by industry interests through my Department.

The Department is at the initial stages of progressing an application for Comber Potatoes under the EU Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status. We have not been approached by interested parties regarding Portavogie prawns or by Glastry ice cream.

Rural Development Programme

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the organisations that will be responsible for the delivery of the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007-2013.

(AQO 2348/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Axis 1 of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 will be delivered by a mix of DARD staff and third-party delivery agents.

Focus farms and benchmarking, two elements of measure 1.1, which covers vocational training and information actions, will be delivered by third-party delivery agents, who have yet to be appointed. The farm family options will be delivered through Local Action Groups covering seven council clusters, which I shall presently describe in more detail.

Measures 1.2, adding value to agricultural and forestry products and improving marketing capability, and 1.4, the supply chain development programme, will be delivered directly by the Department.

Measure 1.3, modernisation of agricultural holdings, will be delivered by third-party delivery agents, who have yet to be appointed.

Under Axis 2 of the NIRD 2007 - 13, DARD's Countryside Management Branch is responsible for the development, delivery and management of the Agri-environment Programme, including the Organic Farming Scheme.

The Agri-environment Programme will be delivered through the new and improved Countryside Management Scheme (NIRD). It is anticipated that this scheme will be open to applications late spring / early summer 2008.

Rural Payments and Inspection Division, DARDNI, deliver the Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowance Scheme under Axis 2.

Forestry Schemes are delivered by Forest Services under Axis 2.

The quality-of-life measures under Axis 3 of the programme will be delivered by seven council clusters, each in partnership with a newly formed

Local Action Group. Each cluster will have one council as lead financial actor. The clusters that have formed are:

1. Antrim, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey, in which Antrim will lead;
2. Ballymena, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Larne and Moyle, in which Ballymena will lead;
3. Ards, Banbridge, Down and North Down, in which Ards will lead;
4. Magherafelt, Cookstown, Dungannon and Enniskillen, in which Cookstown will lead;
5. Belfast, Castlereagh and Lisburn, in which Lisburn will lead;
6. Omagh, Strabane, Derry and Limavady, in which Omagh will lead; and
7. Armagh, Craigavon, and Newry and Mourne, for which a lead council will shortly be agreed.

The clusters are now beginning to animate their areas in preparation for the competitive selection of Local Action Groups, which will include at least 50% representation from the economic and social partners, as well as organisations representing civil society. The role of the Local Action Groups will be, in partnership with their council cluster, to define a local development strategy for the cluster area to inform priorities for programme delivery.

As managing authority, DARD will, of course, retain overall responsibility for delivery of the 2007-2013 NI Rural Development Programme.

Farming Sector

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the assistance being offered to encourage those in the farming sector, under the age of 35, to remain in the sector.

(AQO 2309/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department, primarily through the Development Service of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) provides support and assistance to those farmers of all age groups who wish to develop their farm business and commit to a future in the industry.

CAFRE's team of Development Advisers, who are located throughout the North, work with farmers through delivery of tailored Development Plans for their businesses. Through this process business objectives and development needs are identified and the appropriate support agreed. Development Advisers provide support to these farmers through delivery of:

- **Benchmarking** – this enables farmers to compare their business / farm enterprise performance with other similar businesses. With the support of Development Advisers participating farmers can set and monitor realistic targets for the development of the businesses;
- **Knowledge and Technology Transfer** – through a diverse range of projects, CAFRE encourages the industry to adopt world-class, leading edge technology. CAFRE Development Advisers assist farmers to deal with specific issues of adopting these technologies within their own business environment. Depending on the specific technologies economic, environmental, health and safety or animal welfare benefits will accrue;
- **Training** – CAFRE has developed a wide portfolio of short courses to meet the competence development needs of those within the industry. These programmes are delivered locally. Many of them allow farmers to gain a nationally recognised qualification. In recent years considerable investment has been put into developing a suite of "Challenge" programmes. These are designed to help farmers meet a specific business objective through a supported learning environment that includes workshops, visits to other business units and mentoring.

For those young people wishing to pursue a career in farming, CAFRE also provides further and higher education programmes in agriculture. Courses ranging from NVQ level 2 to Honours degree level, (which is delivered in partnership with Queen's University, Belfast), are available at CAFRE's Greenmount Campus in Antrim. The NVQ level 2 part-time programme is also available at CAFRE's Enniskillen Campus.

On behalf of DARD, CAFRE is also currently delivering the New Entrants Scheme (NES) which commenced in June 2005. Under the NES, participants are encouraged to come forward with innovative agricultural projects that will add value and make a positive impact to the farming industry and the rural economy.

Financial assistance takes the form of an interest rate subsidy on loans taken out in pursuance of an agreed agricultural project as detailed in the applicant's business plan. The maximum amount of interest rate subsidy available is £17,000 and the maximum duration of subsidised interest payment is five years.

The Scheme was originally due to close in June 2008. However, in December 2007 I announced that, subject to the necessary legislative amendments, the closing date for applications to the Scheme will be extended to 27 February 2009 or when the £4.5 million

budget has been fully committed, whichever comes sooner. At current rates of expenditure it is anticipated that the budget will support 280-290 applicants.

Brucellosis in Cattle

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her plans to tackle brucellosis in cattle. (AQO 2369/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: We have made significant progress in recent years with Brucellosis. Since peak levels for the disease in 2002, the herd incidence has been reduced by more than 50%. My ultimate aim is to eradicate Brucellosis completely from the North and we are continuing to work towards that end.

I will continue to ensure that everything possible is done to keep pushing forward towards the eradication of this disease. Our veterinary assessment is that as we continue to drive Brucellosis levels down, we will need to retain all aspects of the existing control programme. My Department will continue to monitor and improve the implementation of the programme according to the disease situation as it changes. We may need stricter measures as we deal with the tail of the epidemic. We will also need the co-operation of farmers through good biosecurity and compliance with the rules.

At present, my Department is considering what additional measures might be applied in any areas in the North where Brucellosis incidence is highest, including the border areas of South Armagh but also Newry and Fermanagh, or any other area where the disease might flare up. This is so that we will contain and stamp out disease in any disease hotspot areas and prevent it spreading to other areas in the North.

Over the coming months, my Department will be engaging with farmers around the North to raise awareness about the disease risks and to advise them what more they could do to protect their herds from Brucellosis. This must be a genuine partnership effort with the industry. Individuals play a vital role in reducing the spread of this disease. For instance, it is critical that farmers maintain good biosecurity on their farms such as maintaining good boundary fencing, and making sure that negative pre movement test results are received before moving cattle. It is also vitally important that farmers report any abortions in cattle, immediately, because it is by detecting the disease early that we can prevent it from spreading.

There is very close, on-going co-operation between my Department and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (DAFF) in Dublin on Brucellosis. There is an active North/South Working Group which brings together officials from DARD and DAFF that

meets regularly to specifically discuss Brucellosis issues and share good practice.

This close level of North/South co-operation will continue, given the interest we all share in moving as quickly as we can towards an island that is free of this disease.

Farm Nutrient Management Scheme

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm that the department has been advised that documents accepting the terms and conditions of the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme, posted by approved applicants, (i) have not been delivered to Orchard House; or (ii) may have been mislaid in her department's office. (AQO 2301/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: All documents received by the Department under the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme (FNMS) are recorded and acknowledged on the Department's data base.

Since the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme opened on 26 January 2005 over 3,000 FNMS approvals have been issued. Some 20 applicants have stated that they returned their signed FNMS acceptance documents by post but the Department has no record of having received them either in Orchard House or in any of the County Agricultural Offices. There is no evidence that the Department has mislaid any FNMS documents.

Farmers have not been disadvantaged and duplicate approvals were issued where necessary.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Community and Voluntary Sector

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the groups within the community and voluntary sector that have been informed that funding will cease in March 2008; and to outline the services/programmes that will be affected. (AQW 4274/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): The Department has not informed any community or voluntary groups that funding will cease in March 2008.

Voluntary and Community Sector

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail, since the publication of the Budget, those groups within the voluntary and community sector which have secured funding and for what services. (AQW 4276/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Through awards made under the Community Sport Programme, the following organisations have been awarded additional funding to complete a project level evaluation at the end of their initial 3 year investment award (2005-2008):

Organisation	Amount - £	Project
Age Concern	2,000	Community Sport Development Initiative (Lisburn)
Youth Sport Omagh	1,500	Community Sport Programme – people with disabilities, women & girls
Newry & Mourne Carers Association	2,500	Swimming Lessons for Adult Family Carers
Greater Village Regeneration Trust and Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group in association with Castlereagh Borough Council	5,000	Older & Active Programme

Through awards made under the Community Sport Programme, the following organisations have been awarded additional funding for the training and deployment of community coaches through the Inclusive Community Coach Programme.

Organisation	Number of individuals selected for programme	Total amount - £
Brownlow Campus Sports Trust	1	1366
Clarendon Sports Association	1	1366
Greater Village Regeneration Trust	1	1366
Down Clubmark Association	1	1366
Youth Sport Omagh	2	2732
Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group	1	1366

Arts funding through Northern Ireland Screen has been issued as follows:

Organisation	Amount - £
Cinemagic	37, 500
Nerve Centre	82, 500
Queens Film Centre (QFT)	60, 750
Belfast Film Festival (BFF)	40, 500
Northern Visions	78, 750
Cinemobile	7, 500
Nerve Centre – After School Film Clubs, North West	20, 000
Cinemagic – Ater Schools Film Clubs	60, 000
Creative Learning Centres (CLC) – Studio On	237, 500
CLC – Amma Centre	93, 750
CLC – Co-Ordinator	30, 000
CLC - Nerve Centre	138, 750

Festivals Provision

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answer to AQO 1772/08, if he will consider making provision for other festivals if he is provided with three-year business plan for them. (AQW 4427/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Only in very exceptional cases would the Department undertake a direct funding role. However, on a without prejudice basis, I am considering if provision should be made to facilitate a small number of established festivals who can demonstrate over time a greater self-reliance on box office receipts and private sector sponsorship.

Translation of Correspondence

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the expenditure spent on the translation of correspondence received by all Departments, that was written in (i) Irish; (ii) Ulster-Scots; and (iii) other languages, in the last two years. (AQW 4494/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Records kept by my Department do not specify the type of document translated. I cannot distinguish the amount spent on correspondence received from the amount spent on other translations such as responses to correspondence, advertisements and official documents.

Detailed breakdowns of translation costs for each Government Department for each of the last two years are provided in the following tables. These figures are provided to DCAL by each Department annually.

Breakdown 2005/06						
Department	Total 2005/06	Irish	Ulster Scots	* Ethnic	Sign	** Other
NIO	£527,454.57	£480.76	£0.00	£510,893.87	£16,079.94	£0.00
DE	£37,827.10	£19,349.27	£0.00	£14,094.27	£3,559.65	£823.91
DARD	£5,076.85	£3,192.16	£95.89	£1,590.00	£0.00	£198.80
DEL	£232,064.00	£0.00	£0.00	£230,841.00	£1,223.00	£0.00
DETI	£7,510.19	£390.89	£0.00	£5,430.59	£1,611.17	£77.54
DFP	£1,498.03	£899.73	£0.00	£180.00	£356.50	£61.80
DHSSPS	£27,262.66	£8,974.00	£0.00	£17,545.66	£0.00	£743.00
DOE	£16,330.78	£7,290.06	£7,931.62	£309.10	£800.00	£0.00
DRD	£546.04	£436.04	£0.00	£110.00	£0.00	£0.00
DSD	£309,871.19	£0.00	£0.00	£308,602.40	£561.00	£707.79
OFMDFM	£24,081.60	£2,740.77	£515.36	£15,210.47	£4,291.60	£1,323.40
DCAL	£25,183.92	£20,801.17	£783.40	£1,535.90	£532.30	£1,531.15
Total	£1,214,706.93	£64,554.85	£9,326.27	£1,106,343.26	£29,015.16	£5,467.39

Breakdown 2006/07						
Department	Total 2006/07	Irish	Ulster Scots	Ethnic*	Sign	Other**
NIO***	£359,775.00	£1,963.00	£193.00	£337,935.00	£19,070.00	£614.00
DE	£235,520.11	£19,371.88	£50.61	£212,177.62	£3,590.00	£330.00
DARD	£8,723.20	£2,087.49	£489.77	£6,145.94	£0.00	£0.00
DEL	£118,987.71	£2,375.06	£630.00	£35,795.65	£80,187.00	£0.00
DETI	£12,482.65	£223.75	£0.00	£11,622.02	£113.00	£523.88
DFP	£14,040.03	£9,971.29	£0.00	£174.36	£3,763.88	£130.50
DHSSPS	£14,786.46	£14,046.45	£0.00	£740.01	£0.00	£0.00
DOE	£22,246.57	£20,145.87	£1,060.50	£508.20	£532.00	£0.00
DRD	£5,042.51	£410.67	£175.00	£1,547.34	£2,593.00	£316.50
DSD	£262,630.97	£1,932.88	£0.00	£257,924.33	£990.95	£1,782.81
OFMDFM	£14,926.86	£3,891.97	£499.60	£7,815.46	£2,111.40	£608.43
DCAL	£44,918.38	£40,667.70	£0.00	£2,191.31	£0.00	£2,059.37
Total	£1,114,080.45	£117,088.01	£3,098.48	£874,577.24	£112,951.23	£6,365.49

* Ethnic refers to translations other than English, Irish and Ulster Scots

** Other refers to braille and interpretation costs

***NIO have identified an additional £552,348 in Interpretation costs which has not yet been categorised for use in the above tables.

Irish Translation

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) to confirm that his department provides translations of Assembly written questions from English into Irish for the Department of Education and other Government Departments; (ii) to

detail the cost of providing these translations; and (iii) what assessment he has made of the extent to which the provision of these services contributes to delays in meeting response times for questions. (AQW 4550/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The translation service operated by my Department has overseen requests for translation of Written Assembly

Questions from the Department of Education. No other Government Department has requested translations in relation to Written Assembly Questions.

My Department does not keep a record of the translation costs organised by document type however the Department of Education have estimated that £346.33 has been spent on translations into Irish for inclusion in answers to Written Assembly Questions. This work is ongoing and these costs relate to invoices received as of 3 March 2008.

I am unable to offer an assessment of the means by which my Ministerial colleagues choose to respond to questions asked of their Departments. My Department does not operate a policy of translating Written Assembly Questions and therefore there is no effect on the response times.

Circuit Racing

Mr Burnside asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his plans for supporting motor cycle road and closed circuit racing in 2008.
(AQO 2273/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for supporting motor cycle road and closed circuit racing in Northern Ireland is a matter in the first instance for the governing bodies of motorsport as represented by the 2&4 Wheel Motorsport Steering Group Limited (2&4 Wheel MSG).

My Department has made available a sum of £100,000 to assist 2&4 Wheel MSG support motor cycle road and closed circuit racing in Northern Ireland during 2008.

In addition to this, I have met with representatives of the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland (MCUI) and 2&4 Wheel MSG to discuss how major motor cycle events can be further developed.

Library Provision

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to indicate the measures he has put in place to avert cuts in community library provision in Belfast.
(AQO 2361/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Following the Comprehensive Spending Review public consultation exercise, I secured an additional £4 million pounds for my Department for the next two years.

Of this, I have allocated £1 million to libraries over the next two years and the Belfast Education and Library Board will benefit from this allocation.

I have also secured in the region of £30 million pounds capital for the next three years, and a further £107 million for the following seven years, to modernise and improve the library estate across Northern Ireland and I would encourage all Boards, including Belfast, to bring forward proposals to access this funding.

However, the Belfast Education and Library Board is responsible for determining how best to deliver public library services in Belfast from within available resources.

Irish-Language Broadcasting Fund

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the meetings his Department has had with the United Kingdom Government in order to secure additional funding for the Irish Language Broadcasting Fund.
(AQO 2334/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My officials held initial discussions with colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office both before and after Christmas with a view to determining how the UK ensures compliance with the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in respect of its agreed media provisions.

Broadcasting remains a reserved matter, therefore, it is planned to continue these discussions with officials in the Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

Motor Sport Safety Measures

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give a timescale within which allocations will be made from the funding announced for motor sport safety measures.
(AQO 2283/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for the allocation of funding for motorsport events, including the timescale within which allocations are made, is a matter, in the first instance, for the governing bodies of motorsport as represented by the 2&4 Wheel Motorsport Steering Group Limited (2&4 Wheel MSG). I understand that 2&4 Wheel MSG is currently in discussion with motorsport clubs over the allocation of the recently announced funding.

Multi-Sports Stadium

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide an update on the expected completion date for a new multi-sports stadium.
(AQO 2288/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: A completion date for the Multi-Sports Stadium is dependent on how quickly we can get on a decision on a way forward. The Outline Business Case on the

Multi-Sports Stadium is currently with the Department of Finance and Personnel for scrutiny and, if approved, will then be submitted, as part of the overall Maze/Long Kesh proposal, to the Executive for consideration. The entire process could however take a number of months.

Elite Facilities Projects

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give a timescale within which the next stage of the proposed elite facilities projects will be completed by Sport Northern Ireland. (AQO 2296/08)

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.

Once we have agreed the budget available for the Elite Facilities Capital Programme, Sport Northern Ireland will then proceed with issuing letters to those organizations that have been approved to proceed to the next stage. It is intended that this will happen in the next future.

Devolution of Broadcasting

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his department's efforts to secure the devolution of broadcasting responsibilities and powers. (AQO 2352/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Broadcasting responsibilities and powers are currently reserved matters and therefore I cannot comment further.

Stadium Development

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the capital grants that are available for stadium development in relation to (i) rugby; (ii) gaelic games; and (iii) soccer, in this year's budget. (AQO 2317/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The recently announced capital budget for sport is £31.2m in 2008/09, £36.4m in 2009/10 and £44m in 2010/11.

Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding. SNI is currently considering how these funds can be allocated across sport. As part of that process, SNI is working closely with sports governing bodies, including that for Soccer, on stadium development needs. Decisions on the grants available for stadium development, including maximum grants, will be taken by SNI once this process is completed

Ulster Scots

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the resource implications of moving Ulster Scots from Part II to Part III Status. (AQO 2257/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It would not be possible to determine the resource implications required to move Ulster Scots from Part II to Part III of the Charter without carrying out an extensive study across a number of Northern Ireland Civil Service and Whitehall Departments. This may determine the resource implications to those areas of the UK Government that could be affected by the Charter.

Library Services

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the revenue and capital monies available to library services. (AQO 2314/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The total libraries recurrent budget for each of the next three years is £31.3m in 2008/09, £32m in 2009/10 and £31.8m in 2010/11.

These figures include funding for public libraries and other library funded bodies.

The capital budget is £6.1m for 2008/09, £11.5m in 2009/10 and £14m in 2010/11. The 10 year Capital Investment Strategy allocates a further £107 million in the following seven years to library capital projects.

Stadium Development

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the grants available under capital stadium development for senior soccer clubs; and (ii) the maximum grant available. (AQO 2311/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The recently announced capital budget for sport is £31.2m in 2008/09, £36.4m in 2009/10 and £44m in 2010/11. Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding. SNI is currently considering how these funds

can be allocated across sport. As part of that process, SNI is working closely with sports governing bodies, including that for Soccer, on stadium development needs. Decisions on the grants available for stadium development, including maximum grants, will be taken by SNI once this process is completed

EDUCATION

Fabricated Items

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Education to detail all those who tendered for stainless steel fabricated items in newly built schools in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area; and to detail the successful tenderers, in each of the last two years. (AQW 988/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): I have asked for a review of the Boards' procurement processes to provide assurance that there is compliance with best procurement practice.

The North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) have advised their tendering procedures is to advertise publicly for main contractors who wish to be included in a select list of contractors for their major schemes. A short list would then be prepared (based on approved criteria) and the successful contractors would be invited to submit tenders in due course.

It is the successful main contractor's decision as to which sub-contractor to appoint for the supply and fitting of stainless steel fixtures. The NEELB has confirmed that four new schools have been built within its area in the last two years.

Ceapadh príomhchonraitheoir difriúil i ngach cás, agus tuigim gurb é Stephens Catering Equipment Ltd an fochonraitheoir a bhí ceaptha ag na conraitheoirí go léir le feistí dosmálta a sholáthar agus a fheistiú.

A different main contractor was appointed in each case, and I understand that Stephens Catering Equipment Ltd was the sub-contractor appointed by all the contractors for the supply and fitting of stainless steel fixtures.

Maintenance Funding

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education to detail the planned reductions in maintenance funding for primary schools in the Strangford constituency, in each of the next three years. (AQW 2793/08)

The Minister of Education: The amount of funding allocated to maintenance by the South Eastern

Education and Library Board is decided each year as a portion of its block grant.

Ní bheidh an Bord in ann a maoiniú pleanáilte i gcomhair cothabhála do na trí bliana seo romhainn a shocrú go leithdháiltear a bhlocdheontais do na blianta sin.

The Board will not be in a position to establish its planned maintenance funding for the next three years until after its block grants for those years are allocated.

Written Question

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education why an answer to AQW 1772/08 has not yet been received, given that the question was submitted two months ago; and to confirm whether or not the principle of academic selection is safeguarded in legislation.

(AQW 2864/08)

The Minister of Education: Ba mhaith liom leithscéal a ghabháil as an mhoill freagra a thabhairt ar AQW 1772/08. Tá sé tugtha le fios domh go bhfuil freagra tugtha uirthi faoi seo.

I wish to apologise for the delay in responding to AQW 1772/08 which I understand has now been answered.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education 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 3303/08)

The Minister of Education: Sa tábla thíos tá liosta de na tairiscintí maidir le caiteachas reatha a chuir mo Roinn isteach mar chuid de phróiseas Buiséid 2007. Chuir an Buiséad deiridh an maoiniú breise seo a leanas ar fáil don Oideachas:

The table below lists the bids in relation to current expenditure submitted by my department as part of the Budget 2007 process. The final Budget has provided the following additional funding for Education:

	£m		
	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Current Expenditure	149.1	300.0	428.7

Capital investment requirements were considered as part of the process of formulating the Investment Strategy. The final allocations for Education amount to:

	£m		
	2014-6	253.3	201.1
Capital Investment	214.6	253.3	201.1

BUDGET 2007 – DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION BIDS SET AGAINST PRIORITIES

Title	£000s					
	2008/09		2009/10		2010/11	
	Res	Admin	Res	Admin	Res	Admin
Sustaining Existing Services						
Children and Young People Funding Package - Restoration of Existing Provision	23,174		23,800		24,443	
Departmental Administration - Review of Public Administration/ Reforms		2,078		2,531		2,640
Education Administration Reform	3,000		38,400		13,405	
Education Services: Maintenance of Expenditure Levels (MEL) (Excl Schools' Aggregated School Budgets)	23,956		47,436		72,222	
EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in the north of Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland - Measure 2.2	512		0		0	
Developing Children and Young People						
Healthy Schools	250		3,250		3,750	
Integrated Development Fund (including Renewing Communities) - Continuation of Existing Provision	5,299		5,442		5,589	
Improving the Professional Development of Teachers	5,000		7,200		7,200	
Maintenance of Schools Estate	7,419		10,534		16,000	
Pre-Employment Checks of Teaching/Non-Teaching Staff	942		1,161		1,161	
Preparation for the introduction of new arrangements for the transfer of pupils from primary to post-primary education	1,000		500		500	
School Transport - Safety	4,580		4,640		4,695	
School Budgets - Guaranteed Per Pupil Uplift	114,660		192,327		262,251	
Strengthening Governance	750		1,750		3,000	
Sustainable Living Schools	3,750		5,250		6,500	
Supporting The Economy						
Curriculum, Assessment & ICT	25,567		23,725		22,952	
Early Years - Begin with Quality	27,070		27,810		28,570	
Employability, Careers and Business Education	6,000		6,500		7,000	
Enhance Science Technology Engineering & Mathematics (STEM) Education & Increase Supply of STEM Skills	3,629		6,124		6,124	
Entitlement Framework Support	17,667	500	21,464	510	21,239	520
School Improvement Fund including Measures to Promote Literacy and Numeracy	12,950	500	13,600	510	14,000	520
Extension of Specialist Schools Programme	3,273		4,976		6,792	
Implementation of a Languages Strategy for NI	9,130		9,222		9,419	
PPP and Infrastructure Procurement	8,000		25,555		39,960	
Support for Foundation Stage Statutory Curriculum	20,200		17,200		17,200	
Equality and Inclusion						
Children affected by Educational Disadvantage	3,897		4,214		4,223	
Connecting Schools to their Communities	30,784		32,290		33,935	

Title	£000s					
	2008/09		2009/10		2010/11	
	Res	Admin	Res	Admin	Res	Admin
High Quality Youth Service	7,334		9,164		13,494	
Irish-Medium Education	3,270		2,305		2,325	
Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Inclusion - Early Years/Early Intervention Package	15,697		16,835		14,782	
SEN and Inclusion - Development of School Based Integrated	7,320	500	12,241	510	14,126	520
Capacity building SEN and Inclusion - Enhanced Support	1,297		1,469		1,503	
Totals	397,377	3,578	576,384	4,061	678,360	4,200

Meeting with Scottish Counterpart

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Education to detail the outcome of the meeting with her counterpart in the Scottish Executive. (AQW 3325/08)

The Minister of Education: I met with Fiona Hyslop MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning on 12 December. During the meeting, we discussed a range of issues including Irish and Gaelic-medium education, teacher recruitment and induction, raising standards and tackling educational underachievement and funding.

Tugadh miontuairisc ar an chruinniú don Choiste Oideachais ar 8 Feabhra 2008, agus tá cóip di ar fáil i Leabharlann an Tionóil.

A detailed report on the meeting was provided to the Education Committee on 8 February 2008 and is also available in the Assembly Library.

Meetings Held

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of meetings she has held with (i) MLAs; and (ii) other groups, since she took up office. (AQW 3369/08)

The Minister of Education: Ó ghlac mé oifig, bhí 43 cruinnithe agam le CTRí agus 142 cruinniú le grúpaí eile.

Since I took up office, I have held 43 meetings with MLAs and 142 meetings with other groups

Capital Projects

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Education to outline the capital projects which will begin during the coming year. (AQW 3398/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá na mórthionscadail chaipitil a meastar faoi láthair gurbh fhéidir le hobair

tógála tosú ar an láthair orthu i 2008 sonraithe sa tábla thíos.

The table below details those major capital projects where it is currently estimated construction work could start on site in 2008.

These projects will be progressed with the relevant education authority and the timescales for doing so will be subject to the necessary planning and building processes being completed satisfactorily and the availability of sufficient resources.

School	Details of Project
St Clare's Abbey PS Newry	New school on extended site
Lisnagelvin P.S.	New school on existing site
Lisbellaw P.S.	New school on existing site
Banbridge Academy	Extension & Refurbishment
Templepatrick PS	New school on existing site
St Joseph's P.S Madden, Armagh	New school on existing site
St Columba's P.S, Straw, Draperstown	New school on new site
St Catherine's College, Armagh	Extension
Whitehouse PS, N'Abbey	New school on existing site
St Pat's & St Brigid's P.S. B'castle	New school on existing site
Carrick P.S. Warrenpoint	New school on extended site
St Mary's P.S, Newcastle	New school on existing site
Magherafelt P.S.	New school on new site
Scoil Na Fuisseoige P.S, Belfast	New school on existing site
Magherafelt HS	New school on existing site
St Colman's P.S. Lambeg	New school on extended site
Parkhall College, Antrim	New school on existing site
St Columbkille's P.S. Carrickmore	New school on extended site
St Oliver Plunkett P.S. Forkhill	New school on new site
St Pat's Boys/Girls Acad, Dgnon	New school on existing site

School	Details of Project
Coranny & Cornagague P.S.	New school on new site
St Conor's P.S., Omagh	New school on extended site
Bangor Grammar	New school on new site
Knockevin Spec School, Downpatrick	New school on existing site
Knockbreda HS, Belfast	New school on existing site
Strathearn GS, Belfast	New school on existing site
Glendhu NS, Belfast	New school on existing site
Ravenscroft NS, Belfast	New school on existing site
Glastry College, Ballyhalbert	New school on extended site
Cranny Special School, Omagh	New school on existing site
Arvalee Spec School, Omagh	New school on existing site

Primary School Leavers

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of primary school leavers that have gone to (i) grammar schools; and (ii) secondary schools, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3567/08)

The Minister of Education: Sa tábla thíos tugtar céatadáin na ndaltaí a d'fhág an bhunscoil agus a chuaigh chuig (i) scoileanna gramadaí; agus (ii) meánscoileanna, le cúl bliana anuas.

The percentage of primary school leavers that have gone to (i) grammar schools; and (ii) secondary schools, in each of the last five years is set out in the table, below.

Date Transferring to Post-Primary Education	% Transferring to Grammar Schools (i)	% Transferring to Non-Grammar Schools (ii)
September 2003	36	64
September 2004	38	62
September 2005	38	62
September 2006	39	61
September 2007	39	61

Sustainable Schools

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons for the absence of any reference to a policy for sustainable schools within the Programme for Government and 2008-2011 Budget. (AQW 3669/08)

The Minister of Education: The Programme for Government and Budget documents set out a strategic framework for the delivery of policies and

programmes over the next three years, though they do not provide an exhaustive list of all policies.

Tá beart i gComhaontú Seirbhíse Poiblí 16 “Le pleanáil straitéiseach an eastát scoile a fheabhsú” agus sprioc ghaolmhar le cur chuige pleanála bunaithe sa cheantar a bheith ann. Beidh cur chuige beartais i leith scoileanna inbhuanaithe mar phríomhghné de phleanáil bunaithe sa cheantar.

Public Service Agreement 16 includes an action “To improve the strategic planning of the schools estate” with an associated target to put in place an area-based planning approach. A key element of area-based planning will be a policy approach to sustainable schools.

Professional Consultants

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail whether the precedent that exists to permit her department to employ the services of professional consultants, in relation to work concerning independent integrated schools. (AQW 3716/08)

The Minister of Education: My Department would not normally employ consultants to undertake work in relation to schools which are not in receipt of grant funding.

The Department did not fund any work in relation to Development Proposal 172. Development Proposal 202 involves an existing grant-aided school, Down Academy, which is owned by the South Eastern Education and Library Board.

Building options for existing schools are examined through undertaking a feasibility study and an economic appraisal. Professional consultants have been engaged by my Department to undertake a feasibility study and an appraisal in this case and work is continuing to complete them.

Is é £50,000, gan CBL san áireamh, an costas iomlán measta ar an obair atá i gceist.

The overall estimated cost for the work involved is expected to be in the region of £50,000, excluding VAT.

Rowallane Integrated School

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not her Department employed the services of professional consultants in relation to Development Proposal 172, Rowallane Integrated School; and to detail (i) the work completed; and (ii) the cost incurred by her Department. (AQW 3717/08)

The Minister of Education: My Department would not normally employ consultants to undertake

work in relation to schools which are not in receipt of grant funding.

The Department did not fund any work in relation to Development Proposal 172. Development Proposal 202 involves an existing grant-aided school, Down Academy, which is owned by the South Eastern Education and Library Board.

Building options for existing schools are examined through undertaking a feasibility study and an economic appraisal. Professional consultants have been engaged by my Department to undertake a feasibility study and an appraisal in this case and work is continuing to complete them.

Is é £50,000, gan CBL san áireamh, an costas iomlán measta ar an obair atá i gceist.

The overall estimated cost for the work involved is expected to be in the region of £50,000, excluding VAT.

Blackwater Integrated College

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not her Department employed the services of professional consultants in relation to Development Proposal 202, Blackwater Integrated College; and to detail (i) the work completed; and (ii) the cost incurred by her Department. (AQW 3718/08)

The Minister of Education: My Department would not normally employ consultants to undertake work in relation to schools which are not in receipt of grant funding.

The Department did not fund any work in relation to Development Proposal 172. Development Proposal 202 involves an existing grant-aided school, Down Academy, which is owned by the South Eastern Education and Library Board.

Building options for existing schools are examined through undertaking a feasibility study and an economic appraisal. Professional consultants have been engaged by my Department to undertake a feasibility study and an appraisal in this case and work is continuing to complete them.

Is é £50,000, gan CBL san áireamh, an costas iomlán measta ar an obair atá i gceist.

The overall estimated cost for the work involved is expected to be in the region of £50,000, excluding VAT.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of meetings she has held with (i) delegations representing one or more of the local councils; (ii) the Northern Ireland Local Government

Association; and (iii) the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, since May 2007. (AQW 3722/08)

The Minister of Education: Ó Bhealtaine 2007, bhí dhá chruinniú agam le toscairí a bhí mar ionadaithe ar cheann amháin nó níos mó de na comhairlí áitiúla. Tá cruinniú le bheith agam le Cumann Rialtais Áitiúil TÉ. Ní raibh cruinniú agam le Cumann na bPríomhfheidhmeannach de chuid an Rialtais Áitiúil. Bhuaill mé le Comhairle Dúiche an Iúir agus na Múrna.

Since May 2007, I have had two meetings with delegations representing one or more of the local councils. I have a meeting scheduled with the NI Local Government Association (NILGA). I have not met with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE). I have also met with Newry & Mourne District Council.

Academic Selection

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education to confirm the current legislative position in relation to academic selection. (AQW 3854/08)

The Minister of Education: The current system of academic selection within grammar schools has its legislative framework under the 1997 Education Order and its supporting regulations. By virtue of the Education Order 2006, this legislative framework will lapse with effect from Transfer 2010. Article 28 (1) of the 2006 Education Order gives to the Department a power to specify, through regulations, the admissions criteria that schools will be permitted to use.

Faoi Article 28 (2) den Education Order 2006 tá cosc ar an Roinn critéir acadúla iontrála a chuimsiú in aon chritéir cheadaithe iontrála sa todhchaí. Níl Article 28 (2) tosaithe.

Article 28 (2) of the Education Order 2006 precludes the Department from including academic admissions criteria in any future permitted admissions criteria. Article 28(2) is not commenced.

Alternative Education Projects

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of Alternative Education Projects in West Belfast, that are currently in receipt of funding from her Department. (AQW 3955/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department does not fund any Alternative Education Projects in West Belfast. All Departmental funding for alternative education is allocated directly to the Education and Library Boards and it is a matter for each Board to

decide how these funds can be best used to meet the needs of young people in its area.

The Belfast Education and Library Board makes provision for young people, who no longer attend mainstream school, in Loughshore Educational Resource Centre, Conway Education Centre, The Bridge and Newstart Education Centre.

I láthair na huaire tá an Roinn ag obair leis na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne le cinntiú go mbeidh cur chuige níos comhornaíthe ann maidir le hOideachas an Luchta Siúil. Ba cheart go gcuirfeadh sé seo feabhas ar rannpháirtíocht pháistí an Luchta Siúil ag gach leibhéal dár gcóras oideachais.

The Department is currently working alongside the Education and Library Boards to ensure a more co-ordinated approach to Traveller education. This should improve participation of Traveller children at all levels of our education system.

An Munia Tober's Alternative Education Project

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Education to detail the plans her Department has to fund An Munia Tober's Alternative Education Project in West Belfast. (AQW 3956/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department does not fund any Alternative Education Projects in West Belfast. All Departmental funding for alternative education is allocated directly to the Education and Library Boards and it is a matter for each Board to decide how these funds can be best used to meet the needs of young people in its area.

The Belfast Education and Library Board makes provision for young people, who no longer attend mainstream school, in Loughshore Educational Resource Centre, Conway Education Centre, The Bridge and Newstart Education Centre.

I láthair na huaire tá an Roinn ag obair leis na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne le cinntiú go mbeidh cur chuige níos comhornaíthe ann maidir le hOideachas an Luchta Siúil. Ba cheart go gcuirfeadh sé seo feabhas ar rannpháirtíocht pháistí an Luchta Siúil ag gach leibhéal dár gcóras oideachais.

The Department is currently working alongside the Education and Library Boards to ensure a more co-ordinated approach to Traveller education. This should improve participation of Traveller children at all levels of our education system.

Training Sessions

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education to detail the professional in-service training sessions her Department provided to teachers, and head teachers, on (i) tackling bullying of children with special needs; and (ii) the academic attainment and attendance of children with special educational needs.

(AQW 4003/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education does not provide any training for teachers or head teachers in these areas. In-service teacher training is provided by each of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) and I understand that anti-bullying training focuses on the needs of all children and young people and is not specific to those with special educational needs. The aim of the training is to encourage and facilitate a whole-school approach to the development of an anti-bullying culture.

Training is followed up with school-based advice from ELB staff and on-going telephone guidance and support in relation to specific anti-bullying issues and on the content of a school's anti-bullying policy. Advice on preventative strategies including Positive Behaviour Management, Circle Time, training of ancillary staff and awareness raising sessions for parents is also available to schools.

This year the Inter-Board Anti-bullying Group, which has close links with the local Anti-Bullying Forum, facilitated the development of an anti-bullying teacher training programme to ensure consistency of approach across the North.

Déanann na scoileanna féin gnóthachtáil agus tinreamh páistí agus daoine óga a bhfuil riachtanais speisialta acu a mheas ar bhonn aonraic cionn is an réimse leathan riachtanas a bhíonn acu.

Attainment and attendance of children and young people with special education needs is considered individually by their schools due to their diverse profile of needs.

Educational Performance

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education to detail the priority (i) a receiving school; and (ii) an over-subscribed receiving school, is to give to previous educational performance by primary school children, under her proposals for post-primary education.

(AQW 4084/08)

The Minister of Education: My proposals provide for a rounded picture of a child's education and aptitude for learning to be used to inform an advisory procedure which results in a parent and child determining the most suitable provision for a child.

This advisory procedure would operate in a context where there are no academic admissions criteria.

Nuair a bhíonn ró-éileamh ann cuireann na scoileanna critéir iontrála i bhfeidhm maidir le teaghlach, pobal agus critéir threolaíochta, agus beidh na mionsonruithe seo le plé.

Where oversubscribed, schools would apply admissions criteria including family, community and geographical criteria, the detail of which will be subject to consultation.

Portadown College

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education to provide a timescale within which she will announce (i) the results of the economic appraisals; and (ii) a start date, in relation to the new build at Portadown College. (AQW 4113/08)

The Minister of Education: Chuir Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Deiscirt breithmheas eacnamaíochta (BE) athbhreithnithe faoi bhráid na Roinne i mí Dheireadh Fómhair agus tá sé seo ag an Roinn faoi láthair le faomhadh.

A revised Economic Appraisal (EA) was submitted to the Department by the Southern Education and Library Board in October and is currently with the Department for approval. It also needs the approval of the Department of Finance and Personnel. Subject to full approval being forthcoming and the project progressing through the planning stages it is expected that the new build could commence in spring 2009.

Bunscoil an Traonaigh

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education to detail the total investment made in the purchase of lands to site Bunscoil an Traonaigh, on its existing site at Enniskillen Road, Lisnaskea. (AQW 4125/08)

The Minister of Education: My Department has not made any capital investment for purchase of land at this site which is being rented from a local owner. The school was recognised for recurrent funding by my Department in 2004.

To date no approval has been granted by my department for the purchase of land for Bunscoil an Traonaigh sited on the Enniskillen Road, Lisnaskea.

My Department was requested by Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) to assess the suitability of the new site for a school which is in receipt of grant funding since 2004. The new site was approved by my Department's technical advisors.

D'fhiafraigh CnaG de roinnt comhlachtaí poiblí agus den earnáil phríobháideach lena fhionnadh an raibh aon talamh ar fáil sa cheantar arbh fhéidir scoil nua a shuíomh air.

CnaG pursued enquiries with a number of public bodies and the private sector to ascertain if any land was available in the area in which to site a new school. These included the Ministry of Defence, the Housing Executive, the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Western Education and Library Board. No other satisfactory sites were identified by CnaG.

Bunscoil an Traonaigh

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the involvement of; and (ii) the assistance given by, her Department in the purchase of the lands to site Bunscoil an Traonaigh, on its existing site at Enniskillen Road, Lisnaskea. (AQW 4126/08)

The Minister of Education: My department has not made any capital investment for purchase of land at this site which is being rented from a local owner. The school was recognised for recurrent funding by my Department in 2004.

To date no approval has been granted by my Department for the purchase of land for Bunscoil an Traonaigh sited on the Enniskillen Road, Lisnaskea.

My Department was requested by Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) to assess the suitability of the new site for a school which is in receipt of grant funding since 2004. The new site was approved by my Department's technical advisors.

D'fhiafraigh CnaG de roinnt comhlachtaí poiblí agus den earnáil phríobháideach lena fhionnadh an raibh aon talamh ar fáil sa cheantar arbh fhéidir scoil nua a shuíomh air.

CnaG pursued enquiries with a number of public bodies and the private sector to ascertain if any land was available in the area in which to site a new school. These included the Ministry of Defence, the Housing Executive, the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Western Education and Library Board. No other satisfactory sites were identified by CnaG.

Bunscoil an Traonaigh

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education to detail the processes employed by her Department in determining (i) the location of; and (ii) the amount of land required to site, Bunscoil an Traonaigh, on its existing site at Enniskillen Road, Lisnaskea. (AQW 4127/08)

The Minister of Education: My Department has not made any capital investment for purchase of land at this site which is being rented from a local owner. The school was recognised for recurrent funding by my Department in 2004.

To date no approval has been granted by my Department for the purchase of land for Bunscoil an Traonaigh sited on the Enniskillen Road, Lisnakea.

My department was requested by Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) to assess the suitability of the new site for a school which is in receipt of grant funding since 2004. The new site was approved by my Department's technical advisors.

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Bunscoil an Traonaigh

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education to detail the alternative sites that were considered prior to the purchase of the present site for Bunscoil an Traonaigh. (AQW 4128/08)

The Minister of Education: My Department has not made any capital investment for purchase of land at this site which is being rented from a local owner. The school was recognised for recurrent funding by my Department in 2004.

To date no approval has been granted by my department for the purchase of land for Bunscoil an Traonaigh sited on the Enniskillen Road, Lisnakea.

My Department was requested by Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) to assess the suitability of the new site for a school which is in receipt of grant funding since 2004. The new site was approved by my Department's technical advisors.

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CnaG pursued enquiries with a number of public bodies and the private sector to ascertain if any land was available in the area in which to site a new school. These included the Ministry of Defence, the Housing Executive, the Gaelic Athletic Association and the

Western Education and Library Board. No other satisfactory sites were identified by CnaG.

La Salle Boys' School

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of providing a new school building for La Salle Boys' School, Andersontown, Belfast. (AQW 4133/08)

The Minister of Education: Go dtí seo is é £17.466m an costas iomlán leis an foirgneamh nua scoile a sholáthar do Scoil Ghasúr La Salle, Béal Feirste. Cuimsíonn seo an costas tógála, táillí sainchomhairleoirí gairmiúla agus leithdháileadh i gcomhair troscáin agus trealaimh don scoil nua.

The total cost to date for the provision of the new school building for La Salle Boys' School, Belfast is £17.466m. This includes the construction cost, professional consultants' fees and an allocation for the provision of furniture and equipment for the new school.

Saintfield High School

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of providing Saintfield High School with its Information Technology suite. (AQW 4134/08)

The Minister of Education: Ba é £180,000 an costas ar Shraith Seomraí nua Teicneolaíocht Eolais a sholáthar taobh istigh den chóiríocht leathnaithe, athchóirithe as an nua ag Ardscoil Thamhnach na Naomh. Cuimsíonn seo soláthar Seomra Staidéar Gnó; seomra TEC; agus spás d'acmhainní agus spás stórais a bhaineann leo.

The cost of providing the new Information Technology Suite within the newly extended and refurbished accommodation at Saintfield High School was £180,000. This includes the provision of a Business Studies Room; an ICT room; and associated resource and storage spaces.

Educational Psychologist

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the annual salary of the last educational psychologist employed through her Department. (AQW 4135/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education does not employ educational psychologists.

The Education and Library Boards (ELBs) employ educational psychologists and are responsible for their salaries.

I cannot divulge individual salaries as these are personal information and covered by the Data Protection Act.

Chuir príomhfheidhmeannaigh na BOL in iúl dom, áfach, gurb é £30,546 - £40,011 an scála tuarastail atá ann i láthair na huaire do shíceolaí oideachais.

The Chief Executives of the ELBs have, however, informed me that the current salary band for an educational psychologist is £30,546 - £40,011.

Peripatetic Music Tutors

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the current hourly rate of pay for peripatetic music tutors. (AQW 4200/08)

The Minister of Education: Fostaíonn gach ceann den chúig Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne oidí ceoil taistil. Tuigim go mbíonn an ráta tuarastail in aghaidh na huaire éagsúil ag brath ar an údarás fostaíochta féin.

Peripatetic music tutors are employed by each of the five Education and Library Boards. I understand that the hourly rate of pay can vary depending on the individual employing authority.

I have asked the five Education and Library Boards for full details and I will write to the member when I have this information.

Peripatetic Language Tutors

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the proposed hourly rate of pay for peripatetic (i) Spanish; and (ii) Irish, tutors. (AQW 4201/08)

The Minister of Education: £18 an ráta molta in aghaidh na huaire atá ann. Tá an ráta seo bunaithe seo ar chomhairle ó na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne a fhostaíonn na hoidí.

The proposed hourly rate is £18. This rate is based on advice from the Education and Library Boards, who are employing the tutors.

Sustainable Schools

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education to detail the impact that the delay in providing a policy on sustainable schools will have on the next phase of capital investment. (AQW 4221/08)

The Minister of Education: Faoi láthair tá thart ar 100 mórthionscadal caipitil atá i mbun pleanála nó inar thosaigh an obair ar shuíomh agus níl dáta ar bith socraithe le haghaidh fógra faoi chlár caipitil eile. Ní

chuireann foilsiú pholasaí scoileanna inbhuaine isteach dá bhrí sin ar uainiú na chéad chéime eile den infheistíocht chaipitil.

There are currently approximately 100 major capital projects in planning or where work has commenced on site and no date has been set for a further capital programme announcement. The publication of the sustainable schools policy does not therefore impact on the timing of the next phase of capital investment.

Fundamental Review of Special Education

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education to detail the action her department is taking to develop the findings and recommendations of the Fundamental Review of Special Education. (AQW 4248/08)

The Minister of Education: Following referral to the Education Committee and Executive the draft policy proposals and recommendations from the Review of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Inclusion will be issued for public consultation. Based on current timescales, public consultation should commence in July 2008.

Tá £25 milliún ó Cháináisneis 2007 urraithe agam do chur i bhfeidhm na moltaí deiridh. Cuirfear iad seo i bhfeidhm sa bhliain 2010/11 agus cuirfear tús le hobair thábhachtach ullmhúcháin ag tosú sa bhliain 2009/10.

I have secured £25 million from the Budget 2007 for implementation of the final proposals. Implementation will begin in the 2010/11 year, with important preparatory work commencing in 2009/10.

Traveller Educational Projects

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of Traveller educational projects funded by her Department. (AQW 4254/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department provides earmarked funding for the education of Traveller children directly to the education and library boards. A total of £364k has been allocated to the boards for the 2008/09 financial year, equating to £443 per Traveller child. It is the board's responsibility to decide how best to use these funds to meet the needs of Traveller children in their local area.

Ní choinníonn an Roinn mionsonraithe maidir le tionscnaimh aonaracha a dhéanann na boird oideachais agus leabharlainne agus faoi láthair tá sé ag obair leis na boird chun cur chuige níos comhordánaithe a chothú maidir le hoideachas don Lucht Siúil.

The Department does not hold details of individual projects undertaken by the education and library boards and is currently working with the boards to foster a more co-ordinated approach to Traveller education. One of the results of such an approach would be the regional roll-out of successful educational projects which currently operate at individual board level.

Grammar Schools

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children from disadvantaged backgrounds who gained places in grammar schools geographically closest to their homes. (AQW 4303/08)

The Minister of Education: Information about the proximity of pupils admitted to grammar schools to their home address relative to their proximity to alternative school types is not readily available. The most relevant information available in relation to this question is that 6% of children attending grammar schools in 2006/07 had an entitlement to free school meals.

Leis an figiúr seo a chur i gcomhthéacs, bhí 27% de líon na ndaltaí i scoileanna neamhghradamaí i dteideal béilí scoile a fháil in aisce i 2006/07 agus bhí 18% den daonra iomlán iar-bhunscoile i dteideal béilí scoile a fháil in aisce.

To set this figure in context, children entitled to free school meals comprised 27% of the pupil population in non-grammar schools in 2006/07 and the overall level of free school meal entitlement within the post-primary population was 18%.

Educational Technology

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to outline her plans to ensure that staff and managers, who deliver services to blind and partially sighted school pupils, have every opportunity to keep abreast of the latest advances in educational technology for this sector, including a full understanding of the Daisy specification. (AQW 4333/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá sé tuigte agam go ndéanann na cúig Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne athbhreithniú ar riachtanais oiliúna na foirne sa tsainréimse seo ar bhonn rialta.

I understand that the five education and library boards review the training needs of staff in this specialist area on a regular basis. When training needs are identified appropriate mechanisms are put in place to ensure that this training is delivered.

This includes training in the use of specific equipment and appropriate technology that is relevant to pupils who are blind as well as those with visual impairment.

Comprehensive Technology Assessments

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail her plans to ensure that all blind and partially sighted pupils in primary and secondary education receive regular and comprehensive technology assessments; and to provide an assurance that funding will be available to supply any equipment recommended by such assessments, along with the necessary installation and training. (AQW 4334/08)

The Minister of Education: I understand that the five education & library boards (ELBs), under the aegis of the Regional Strategy Group for Special Educational Needs, have established a working group which is dedicated to the specialist area of visual impairment. The aim of this group is to provide a consistent approach across the five boards in relation to service delivery in this specialist area.

Currently, the boards employ specialist teachers in the area of visual impairment either directly or by agreement with Jordanstown Schools. This enables support to be made available to children and young people in the primary and post-primary sectors. Staff in these services have specialist qualifications in visual impairment which facilitates the assessment of children and young people with visual impairments.

Furthermore, recommendations which arise in relation to these assessments which require specific equipment and technology are generally progressed by equipments panels. Consequently, this equipment or technology is ordinarily funded through the ELBs special education budget.

Tá na Boird ag obair lena chinntiú go bhfaigheann baill foirne sa tsainréimse seo an oiliúint riachtanach mar chuid dá bhforbairt leanúnach ghairmiúil lena chinntiú go bhfaigheann páistí agus daoine óga chomh maith le scoileanna tacaíocht chuí i dtaca le húsáid saiteicneolaíocht amhairc.

The Boards are working to ensure that staff in this specialist area receive the necessary training as part of their continuous professional development to ensure that children and young people as well as schools are adequately supported in relation to the use of specialist visual technology.

Accessible Textbook Service

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education to detail the plans she has to set up a properly resourced and

accessible textbook service for blind and partially sighted school children. (AQW 4338/08)

The Minister of Education: I am advised that the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs) currently access material and textbooks for blind and partially sighted pupils from a wide range of specialist sources, including:

- National Blind Children's Society;
- National Library for the Blind;
- Royal National Institute for the Blind.

In addition, each ELB provides textbooks to young people on the basis of locally accessed materials, as well as providing photographic services or adaptive technology services in response to the needs of specific children and young people who are blind or visually impaired.

Material can also be accessed from selected publishers which can meet the needs of children and young people who are blind or who have visual impairments. The ELBs understand the imperative for publishers to take cognisance of Disability Discrimination Legislation relating to accessible textbooks for blind and partially sighted pupils and as a consequence a wider range of material is available than previously.

However, the expediency with which material can be accessed by children and young people is an area where further enhancements to service delivery could be made. In response to the RNIB campaign, "Where's My Book?", DE established a scoping project, which was led by the Education and Library Boards and on which RNIB was represented. The aims of the project were to consider and scope the scale of the NI difficulties in making available materials in the correct format. In conclusion, the scoping study research has found the main conclusion of the RNIB's research "Where's my Book", to be justified and recommends that consideration be given to the establishment of a regional centre which can respond quickly to school requests.

The ELB Regional Strategy Group for Special Educational Needs (RSG) has, therefore, established a working group which is dedicated to the specialist area of visual impairment. The aim of the group is to promote a consistent approach across the five ELBs in relation to service delivery in this specialist area. Further to consideration of this matter by the Visual Impairment Group and consultation with relevant stakeholders, including the voluntary Sector, Statutory Sector, parents as well as children and young people the RSG has acknowledged that a centralised service for textbooks for children and young people who are blind or visually impaired has some merit.

Ag an phointe seo, tá na meicníochtaí trína dtiocfaí ar an tséirbhís nua lárnaithe seo á bhforbairt a thuilleadh faoi láthair.

At this stage, the mechanisms by which this new centralised service would be accessed are currently being developed further.

Accessible Textbook Service

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education what plans she has for a textbook service for blind and partially sighted school children to be in place for the start of the school year in September 2008.

(AQW 4339/08)

The Minister of Education: I am advised that the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs) currently access material and textbooks for blind and partially sighted pupils from a wide range of specialist sources, including:

- National Blind Children's Society;
- National Library for the Blind;
- Royal National Institute for the Blind.

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Ag an pointe seo, tá na meicníochtaí trína dtiocfaí ar an tseirbhís nua lárnaithe seo á bhforbairt a thuilleadh faoi láthair.

At this stage, the mechanisms by which this new centralised service would be accessed are currently being developed further.

Translation and Interpretation Services

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail the financial provision she has for 2008/09 to provide translation and interpretation services for people from ethnic minorities, in relation to the completion of application forms. (AQW 4345/08)

The Minister of Education: The Inclusion and Diversity Service operated by the education and library boards provides translation and interpretation services to aid communication between parents, whose first language is not English, and schools.

Sa bhliain 2008-09 beidh maoiniú de os cionn £1 milliún ar fáil don tSeirbhís Chuimsithe agus Ilchineálachta agus as seo cuirfidh siad seirbhísí aistriúcháin agus ateangaireachta ar fáil.

In 2008-09 the Inclusion and Diversity Service will be funded with just over £1 million, from which they will provide translation and interpretation services. At this point it is not possible to state how much may be spent on translation and interpretation services as it is not possible to predict demand.

Lisanelly Army Barracks

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the proposed development of an education village at the Lisanelly Army Barracks in Omagh. (AQW 4365/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department has received expressions of interest from six schools about the possible development of part of the Lisanelly site as an educational campus and I recently met with representatives from some of those schools and their

management and heard their views in support of the proposed campus.

Tugann Lisanelly fiordheis soláthar oideachais a phleanáil go straitéiseach ar bhonn trasearnála le leas pháistí ar an Ómaigh sa toadhcháil.

Lisanelly provides a real opportunity to plan strategically education provision on a cross-sector basis for the benefit of future children in Omagh

Spanish Lessons

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Education to provide details on private companies that (i) offer; and (ii) deliver, Spanish lessons in primary schools. (AQW 4371/08)

The Minister of Education: Ní choinníonn an Roinn seo sonraí maidir le cuideachtaí príobháideacha a thugann ceachtanna Spáinnise i mbunscoileanna.

My Department does not hold details of private companies who offer or deliver Spanish lessons in primary schools.

Teachers' Pension Scheme

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to outline the reasons for her Department's decision to stop 'added years' payments under the Teachers' Pension Scheme. (AQW 4388/08)

The Minister of Education: Déanaim tagairt don fhreagra a thug mé don Fheisire ó Bhéal Feirste Theas ar 12 Feabhra 2008.

I would refer the Member to the reply I gave the Member for Belfast South on 12 February 2008.

(Official Report published on 15 February 2008, AQW 3331/08)

Teachers' Pension Scheme

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not she will (i) defer the decision to end 'added years' payments under the Teachers' Pension Scheme; and (ii) begin consultation with the teachers' unions on this matter. (AQW 4391/08)

The Minister of Education: No decision has been taken to end the payment of added years: the decision to credit a teacher with additional service remains discretionary. However, in future those who decide to award added years will be accountable for the decision and for the associated costs, as provided for in the Teachers' (Compensation for Redundancy and

Premature Retirement) Regulations (NI) 1991 (as amended).

Is é an Coiste Comhairleach Aoisliúntais do Mhúinteoirí anseo an fóram atá bunaithe do chomhairliúchán ar ábhair a bhaineann leis an Scéim Pinsean Mhúinteoirí.

The Teachers' Superannuation Consultative Committee here is the established forum for consultation on matters relating to the Teachers' Pensions Scheme. Members of the Committee were first made aware in February 2006 that action was required to control the escalating costs of the Premature Retirement Compensation Scheme (PRCS). PRCS was included on the agenda and discussed at subsequent meetings of the Committee held in June 2006, December 2006, June 2007 and November 2007. A PRCS Review Group has now been established for consultation with relevant parties, including teachers' unions, on the arrangements for PRCS for future years. It met on 26 February and a further meeting is scheduled for April.

Accessible Textbook Service

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Education to detail the steps her department is taking to address the problem of access to reading materials for partially sighted people, given that 96% of books are only available in standard print. (AQW 4412/08)

The Minister of Education: Special Education provision is matched to the assessed individual needs of each child, and this assessment will take account of professional advice, both from the education and medical professions, and will consider such matters as the child's age and academic ability. For some the medium through which to make the special education provision may be enlarged print, for others Braille, while for others an IT solution may best meet their needs.

I am advised that the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs) currently access material and textbooks for blind and partially sighted pupils from a wide range of specialist sources, including:

- National Blind Children's Society;
- National Library for the Blind;
- Royal National Institute for the Blind.

In addition, each ELB provides textbooks to young people on the basis of locally accessed materials, as well as providing photographic services or adaptive technology services in response to the needs of specific children and young people who are blind or visually impaired.

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However, the expediency with which material can be accessed by children and young people is an area where further enhancements to service delivery could be made. In response to the RNIB campaign, "Where's My Book?", DE established a scoping project, which was led by the Education and Library Boards and on which RNIB was represented. The aims of the project were to consider and scope the scale of the NI difficulties in making available materials in the correct format. In conclusion, the scoping study research has found the main conclusion of the RNIB's research "Where's my Book", to be justified and recommends that consideration be given to the establishment of a regional centre which can respond quickly to school requests.

The ELB Regional Strategy Group for Special Educational Needs (RSG) has, therefore, established a working group which is dedicated to the specialist area of visual impairment. The aim of the group is to promote a consistent approach across the five ELBs in relation to service delivery in this specialist area. Further to consideration of this matter by the Visual Impairment Group and consultation with relevant stakeholders, including the voluntary Sector, Statutory Sector, parents as well as children and young people the RSG has acknowledged that a centralised service for textbooks for children and young people who are blind or visually impaired has some merit.

Ag an phointe seo, tá na meicníochtaí trína dtiocfaí ar an tsuirbhís nua lárnaithe seo á bhforbairt a thuilleadh faoi láthair.

At this stage, the mechanisms by which this new centralised service would be accessed are currently being developed further.

Special Schools

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Education to provide a list of special schools that cater for the needs of children who are (i) visually impaired; or (ii) blind. (AQW 4413/08)

The Minister of Education: Scoileanna speisialta a riarann faoi láthair do riachtanais pháistí atá (i) lagamhairc; nó (ii) dall:

Special schools that currently cater for the needs of children who are either (i) visually impaired; or (ii) blind:

Belfast Education and Library Board

- Cedar Lodge
- Fleming Fulton
- Glenveagh
- Harberton
- Mitchell House
- Oakwood
- Park Educational Resource Centre
- St.Gerard's Educational Resource Centre

North Eastern Education and Library Board

- Jordanstown
- Castle Tower
- Kilronan
- Riverside
- Sandelford
- Thornfield

South Eastern Education and Library Board

- Beechlawn
- Brookfield
- Clifton
- Killard
- Knockevin
- Longstone
- Parkview
- Tor Bank

Southern Education and Library Board

- Rathore
- Ceara
- Donard
- Lisanally
- Sperrinview

Western Education and Library Board

- Foyleview
- Arvalee
- Elmbrook
- Belmont
- Knockavoe
- Erne
- Rossmarr

Early Childhood Studies

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not her Department will give early years specialist status to graduates of the foundation

degree in Early Childhood Studies, given that it is equivalent to NVQ Level 4. (AQW 4415/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education is currently in the process of considering the Foundation Degree in Early Childhood Studies as being a recognised qualification for Early Years Specialist status. I hope to have a decision on this within the next few months.

Chomh maith leis an riachtanas le cáilíocht oiriúnach atá faofa ag an Roinn, ba cheart réamhthaithí de 2 bhliain ar a laghad a bheith ag Speisialtóir Luathbhlianta ag obair i ról ceannaireachta i suíomh réamhscoile cláraithe, chomh maith leis na scileanna eagraíochtúla is gá.

In addition to the requirement for a suitable qualification approved by the Department, an Early Years Specialist should also have prior experience of at least 2 years working in a leadership role in a registered pre-school setting, and also the necessary organisational skills.

Pupils with Autism

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils with Autism in (i) special schools - severe learning difficulty; (ii) mainstream primary and post primary schools; and (iii) other forms of provision. (AQW 4422/08)

The Minister of Education: Líon na nDaltaí le hUathachas 2007/08

NUMBER OF PUPILS WITH AUSTISM¹ 2007/08

School type	Number of pupils with Autism
Primary schools ^{2,3}	865
Post primary schools ³	230
SLD Special schools ⁴	568
Other ⁵ – MLD Special schools	242
Pre-schools	22
Nursery schools	45

Source: NI school census 2007/08

- 1 It is a possibility that some of the pupils at SEN stages 1 and 2 with this condition may not have been recorded
- 2 Primary includes nursery and reception classes and pupils in years 1 – 7
- 3 Includes pupils in mainstream classes and special units
- 4 Includes pupils who attend schools which cater for both MLD and SLD.
- 5 Excludes Alternative Education Providers, Independent schools and hospital schools

Contact Youth

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline the training given to the counsellors in Contact Youth for the provision of the schools' counselling service. (AQW 4440/08)

The Minister of Education: The tender for the provision of the new Independent Counselling Service for Schools 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 was as follows:

- **Approach to Service Provision:** including marketing / launch proposals, case scheduling and response times, emergency requests arrangements, case closure criteria and organisational administrative systems.
- **Experience of Working with client group**
- **Staff Qualifications** including staff management and quality assurance regime including child protection
- **Cost**

Counsellors employed by Contact Youth must be qualified to at least Diploma level in counselling and have a minimum of 150 hours of clinically supervised practice. Contact Youth provided 9 days induction training including child protection training and specific training on working with young people. An additional day on Child Protection training was provided by the Child Protection Support Service for Schools.

Cuireann Teagmháil leis an Ógra uair go leith maoirseachta aonair agus dhá uair a chloig maoirseachta grúpa sa mhí ar fáil dá gcomhairleoirí.

Contact Youth provide their counsellors with one and a half hours of individual supervision and two hours of group supervision per month. This is facilitated by external clinical supervisors appointed by Contact Youth and exceeds the current recommended requirement of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) Guidelines.

Contact Youth

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline the nature of the supervision given to the counsellors in Contact Youth in the provision of the schools' counselling service. (AQW 4441/08)

The Minister of Education: The tender for the provision of the new Independent Counselling Service for Schools 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 was as follows:

- **Approach to Service Provision:** including marketing / launch proposals, case scheduling and response times, emergency requests arrangements, case closure criteria and organisational administrative systems.
- **Experience of Working with client group**
- **Staff Qualifications** including staff management and quality assurance regime including child protection
- **Cost**

Counsellors employed by Contact Youth must be qualified to at least Diploma level in counselling and have a minimum of 150 hours of clinically supervised practice. Contact Youth provided 9 days induction training including child protection training and specific training on working with young people. An additional day on Child Protection training was provided by the Child Protection Support Service for Schools.

Cuireann Teagmháil leis an Ógra uair go leith maoirseachta aonair agus dhá uair a chloig maoirseachta grúpa sa mhí ar fáil dá gcomhairleoirí.

Contact Youth provide their counsellors with one and a half hours of individual supervision and two hours of group supervision per month. This is facilitated by external clinical supervisors appointed by Contact Youth and exceeds the current recommended requirement of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) Guidelines.

Contact Youth

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline the criteria applied to assess the suitability of Contact Youth for the provision of schools' counselling. (AQW 4442/08)

The Minister of Education: The tender for the provision of the new Independent Counselling Service for Schools 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 was as follows:

- **Approach to Service Provision:** including marketing / launch proposals, case scheduling and response times, emergency requests arrangements, case closure criteria and organisational administrative systems.

- **Experience of Working with client group**
- **Staff Qualifications** including staff management and quality assurance regime including child protection
- **Cost**

Counsellors employed by Contact Youth must be qualified to at least Diploma level in counselling and have a minimum of 150 hours of clinically supervised practice. Contact Youth provided 9 days induction training including child protection training and specific training on working with young people. An additional day on Child Protection training was provided by the Child Protection Support Service for Schools.

Cuireann Teagmháil leis an Ógra uair go leith maoirseachta aonair agus dhá uair a chloig maoirseachta grúpa sa mhí ar fáil dá gcomhairleoirí.

Contact Youth provide their counsellors with one and a half hours of individual supervision and two hours of group supervision per month. This is facilitated by external clinical supervisors appointed by Contact Youth and exceeds the current recommended requirement of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) Guidelines.

Language Strategy

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 3582/08, to confirm that Polish and Portuguese will be considered as part of this language strategy. (AQW 4491/08)

The Minister of Education: I am awaiting recommendations from the joint University of Ulster and the Queen's University of Belfast Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies, to inform an overall languages strategy for the North.

Mar chuid de sin, tá iarrtha ar an Ionad smaoineamh ar bhealaí chun iontógáil raon níos leithne teangacha Eorpacha agus domhanda a chur chun cinn chomh maith le teangacha núíosach sa Tuaisceart, Polainnis agus Portaingéalach san áireamh.

As part of this, the Centre has been asked to consider ways of promoting the uptake of a wider range of European and global languages and also the languages of newcomers to the North, which would include Polish and Portuguese.

Community Relations

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 3994/08, to detail the funding her department will give directly to other organisations to promote community relations work in schools, in the 2008-09 financial year. (AQW 4509/08)

The Minister of Education: The promotion of community relations in schools is delivered by the Schools Community Relations Programme and £1.272m will be allocated across the five Education and Library Boards for 2008/09. The Department funds 26 voluntary organisations through the Community Relations Core Funding Scheme of which 14 are funded to promote community relations in schools. The total allocation for these groups for 2008/09 is £673,390.

Thacaigh an Roinn le tionscnaimh eile i scoileanna ar feadh 2007/08 agus tá cinntí á ndéanamh fós maidir le maoiniú leanúnach.

The Department supported other initiatives in schools throughout 2007/08 and decisions are still being taken in relation to continued funding.

Irish-Medium Sector

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teachers employed in the Irish-medium sector. (AQW 4516/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá 123 múinteoir Bunscoile agus 35 múinteoir Meánscoile fostaithe san earnáil oideachas trí Ghaeilge.

There are 123 Primary school and 35 Secondary school teachers employed in the Irish-medium Sector.

Ethnic Minority Achievement Service

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 2990/08, (i) if, in accordance with the Department's stated policy, the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service has guidelines in place for supporting children and young people who have English as an additional language; (ii) to confirm that the guidelines have been issued to all schools in Northern Ireland; and (iii) to outline the steps she has taken to ensure the guidelines have been implemented in all schools where children whose first language is not English have been enrolled. (AQW 4520/08)

The Minister of Education: A policy on English as an additional language has been publicly consulted on and it is planned to have the draft finalised and launched in all schools in early 2008. To prepare the way for the policy to be applied consistently, the five Education and Library Boards set up a single regional Inclusion and Diversity Service (previously named Ethnic Minority Achievement Service), in April 2007.

This new service brought together services across the five Education and Library Boards in relation to the education of all children and young people whose first language is not English. The aim is to strengthen

and improve support to all EAL pupils, their parents and teaching staff, primarily working through schools by using a number of new services and approaches. It is adopting a regional approach to determine which schools need support and the type of support and to direct work more appropriately.

Since being established, it has set up a number of new services such as interpreting, translating and a multi-lingual website to provide support to teachers and newcomer parents, which can be accessed at www.education-support.org.uk. All these new services are available to all schools in the north of Ireland that require support with the teaching of English to their pupils who have EAL.

In addition to this, I launched a North/South Diversity toolkit for primary school teachers in December 2007. An extensive training programme for all teachers within primary schools has been undertaken in relation to the toolkit. There are plans for toolkits to be developed for post-primary and pre-school education provision.

Schools and teaching staff further benefit from additional support and guidance from January 2008, as the Inclusion and Diversity Service have recruited and placed diversity coordinators, who have previously worked in the area of EAL and have expertise in it, to work with clusters of schools. This initiative facilitates capacity building by working with all schools on whole school and classroom issues, which includes language support

Cuireann an Roinn cistí ar fáil go díreach do scoileanna mar atá £943 an páiste EAL do 2007/08, ag éirí go £983 an páiste i 2008/09. Braitheann sé ar an scoil socrú conas is fearr an t-airgead seo a úsáid agus i ngníomh tá scoileanna ag baint úsáide as ar bhealaí éagsúla ar mhaithe le páistí EAL agus daoine óga ina scoileanna.

The Department also provides funds direct to schools, namely £943 per EAL child for 2007/08, rising to £983 per child in 2008/09. It is up to the schools to decide how best to use this money and in practice schools are using it in a variety of ways for the benefit of the EAL children and young people in their schools.

Press Officers

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of press officers employed by her department. (AQW 4531/08)

The Minister of Education: Faoi láthair tá 4 Preasoifigeach fostaithe ag an Roinn Oideachais.

There are currently 4 Press Officers employed by Department of Education.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Written Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of written questions he has answered in each month since May 2007.

(AQW 4269/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I have answered the following number of written questions each month since May 2007:

Month	No of Questions Answered
May 2007	8
June 2007	31
July 2007	28
August 2007	0
September 2007	21
October 2007	42
November 2007	32
December 2007	15
January 2008	15
February 2008	52
Total (at 27/2/08)	246

People with Disabilities

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the efforts that have been made to widen access to (i) higher education; and (ii) further education, for people with disabilities. (AQW 4270/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

- (i) Widening participation in higher education by students from those groups which are currently under-represented is one of my Department's key strategic goals and targets, in particular, students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with learning difficulties and disabilities.

My Department pays a widening access premium to the universities and university colleges for students with learning difficulties and disabilities. This premium is based on the number of full-time undergraduate students in receipt of a Disabled Students Allowance (DSA). In 2006/07, the total premium paid was £374,000. In 2007/08, the total premium being paid is £371,000.

The DSA, funds the Register of Support Providers which supports administration of a

register of freelance professional and non-professional support workers who are recruited and trained to assist students with disabilities. The Register, which is administered by the University of Ulster, is available to all disabled students in the universities, university colleges and Further Education colleges with higher education provision. Disabled students can avail of a range of support provider roles including coaching for those with dyslexia, note-taker, proof-reader, typist, campus assistant, library assistant and sign language interpreter.

Funding is also provided, by my Department, to Queen's University, Belfast for its Let's Work project. This project is aimed at students and graduates with a disability. A specialist careers adviser offers individual careers guidance and information sessions, supports access to work placements and part-time work, and provides workshops on job-skills and career options after graduation.

- (ii) My Department has in place a range of initiatives and incentives designed to assist those students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who attend Further Education Colleges. These include:
- The introduction of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 which requires Colleges to make their premises and curriculum available to students with disabilities.
 - The Additional Support Fund (£1.5 million in 2007/08) which provides assistance with the costs of technical and personal support for learners with disabilities.
 - Extra funding (£1.5 million in 2007/08) to assist Colleges with the extra costs associated with discrete courses for students with disabilities for whom mainstream courses are unsuitable.
 - Capital Funding - Since April 2000, DEL has allocated over £16m of capital funding to Colleges to improve access for people with disabilities.
 - Support Fund – (£2.4 million in 2007/08). The Fund enables Colleges to provide financial help to students whose participation in Further Education is inhibited by financial considerations. Priority is given to students entering from care and to those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
 - Financial support for staff development activities.

My Department is currently undertaking a review of the nature and extent of special needs provision throughout the Further Education network, to

determine how best provision might be improved further, within the terms of Further Education's remit.

People with Disabilities

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of people with (i) sight difficulties; and (ii) hearing difficulties at (a) universities; and (b) further education colleges; and to outline the assistance that is available to them. (AQW 4271/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Available statistics show that, in the academic year 2006/7, there were 305 students enrolled at Queen's University and the University of Ulster who were classified as blind or partially sighted. In the same year, there were 260 students who were classified as deaf, or having a hearing impairment.

In the academic year 2006/7, there were 488 students enrolled at Further Education Colleges who were classified as blind or partially sighted. In the same year, there were 839 students who were classified as deaf, or having a hearing impairment.

At each institution, those students who declare a disability are offered individually tailored support. This ranges from personal assistance at lectures and examinations to the purchase of specialised equipment and reasonable modifications to the respective institution's estate.

Language Tutors

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students who require (i) British; (ii) Irish; and (iii) other, sign language tutors. (AQW 4272/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Available statistics show that, in the current academic year (2007/8), there are 448 students undertaking a course in Sign Language at Further Education Colleges in Northern Ireland; (i) 441 students use a British Sign Language Tutor and (ii) 7 students use an Irish Sign Language Tutor.

Language Tutors

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of (i) British; (ii) Irish; and (iii) other, sign language tutors. (AQW 4359/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Available statistics show that, at present, there are (i) eighteen exclusively British Sign Language (BSL) tutors, (ii) six exclusively Irish Sign Language (ISL)

tutors and (iii) no sign language tutors of other languages.

A further six tutors are bilingual in both British and Irish Sign Language.

Appleby Trust

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to assist the Appleby Trust to secure long-term funding to continue to assist and support work placements in the Armagh area for people with learning difficulties; and what consideration he has given to liaising with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in order to increase the level of available funding to the Appleby Trust.

(AQW 4500/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department for Employment and Learning does not fund the Appleby Trust, nor has it been approached by the Trust for funding.

I understand that the Appleby Trust has now secured funding from an anonymous benefactor which will be matched by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust for a year.

Modern Apprenticeships

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the cost of the 'Review of Modern Apprenticeships in the North West - Understanding demographics/trends to date and forecasting future scenarios'.

(AQW 4505/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department engaged PriceWaterhouseCoopers to carry out the study at a total cost of £23,713.

Independent Organisations

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4500/08, to detail his department's policy in relation to the financial assistance given to independent organisations who help people with learning disabilities gain work placements.

(AQW 4686/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department for Employment and Learning does not provide financial assistance to individual organisations on an ad-hoc basis to provide services to people with learning disabilities. A range of programmes and services are funded by the Department to assist people with disabilities, including learning disabilities, find and keep employment. Contracts to deliver these programmes and services are awarded as

a result of publicly advertised tendering exercises under the control of the Department of Finance and Personnel.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Tourism Funding

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the tourism funding that his department has provided in each of the last three years, broken down by parliamentary constituency.

(AQW 3692/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): Tourism funding made available by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) and Invest NI is provided in the table below. While the investment is shown on a Parliamentary Constituency basis, the economic and tourism benefits that this brings have a much wider effect. For example, investment in the five Signature Projects will bring benefits across the whole of Northern Ireland. The table also includes funding committed to tourism projects which were implemented over several Constituencies.

In addition to direct financial assistance, NITB provides support in the form of marketing, print publications, media and public relations activities, and coverage of tourism products in Parliamentary Constituencies on its consumer website www.discovernorthernireland.com. Invest NI also offers support for capability development to tourist accommodation businesses for areas such as training, management development and the development of ICT based management information systems.

TABLE – FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE OFFERED BY THE NORTHERN IRELAND TOURIST BOARD AND INVEST NI

Parliamentary Constituency	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	Total
Across 2 or more constituencies	£4,119,880	£592,628	£1,030,975	£5,743,483
Belfast East	£31,000	-	£825,000	£856,000
Belfast North	£457,144	£142,204	-	£599,348
Belfast South	£638,819	£23,825	£29,573	£692,217
Belfast West	£15,000	-	-	£15,000

Parliamentary Constituency	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	Total
East Antrim	-	£219,000	£130,000	£349,000
East Londonderry	£264,889	£917,271	£256,289	£1,438,449
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	£661,681	£445,710	£3,705,577	£4,812,968
Foyle	£237,859	£2,712,269	£617,930	£3,568,058
Lagan Valley	£223,408	£225,000	-	£448,408
Mid Ulster	£64,529	£167,647	-	£232,176
Newry & Armagh	£371,199	-	-	£371,199
North Antrim	£71,761	£347,302	£1,905,368	£2,324,431
North Down	£134,845	£82,099	£1,160	£218,104
South Antrim	£13,428	£109,260	£28,364	£151,052
South Down	£302,452	£2,544,500	-	£2,846,952
Strangford	£98,762	£22,396	-	£121,158
Upper Bann	-	£58,529	£475,000	£533,529
West Tyrone	£40,200	£9,000	£15,000	£64,200
Total	£7,746,856	£8,618,640	£9,020,236	£25,385,732

Attracting Tourists

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the studies that have been carried out by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board in relation to the needs of tourists from the United States; (ii) the initiatives he has planned in order to develop the Ulster-Scots/Scotch-Irish culture as a means of attracting tourists; and (iii) the amount of money invested in developing Ulster-Scots/Scotch-Irish culture as a means of attracting tourists, in each year for the last 5 years. (AQW 3847/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) carried out a Visitor Attitudes Survey at the end of 2007, which questioned a sample of visitors (including those from the USA) on a variety of aspects of their stay. Responses are being analysed and will be used to inform the NITB Corporate Plan.

Tourism Ireland (TIL) is responsible for promoting Northern Ireland in the US market. In partnership with an Industry Steering Group (which included a number of Northern Ireland partners), TIL carried out a major review of the North American market in 2006. The Review encompassed an in-depth examination of prevailing market conditions, the competition, the

market's potential together with a critical assessment of TIL's strategy, marketing programmes and operating resources for the market.

Where Ulster Scots cultural activities can contribute to the development of cultural tourism opportunities, NITB uses www.discovernorthernireland.com as a tool to provide consumers with relevant information. NITB promotes Northern Ireland's cultural diversity by including Ulster Scots cultural activities, where appropriate, in its cultural tourism marketing material.

NITB funds development of the tourism product through its Tourism Development Scheme (TDS). To date no applications have been made by promoters of Ulster-Scots/Scotch-Irish projects. Under the Peace II Scheme in 2004 an offer of £30,000 was made to the On Eagles Wings Scotch-Irish event for international marketing.

NITB includes Ulster-Scots features in broader campaigns where appropriate. For example, the Andrew Jackson Centre and the Ulster Scots history of the Antrim Coast and Glens are included in promotional material relating to the Causeway Coastal Route, and Ulster-Scots music festivals will feature in NITB's forthcoming campaign focussing on music and festivals. A specific publication, 'Northern Ireland: the American Connection', was produced for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, at a cost of £13,000.

Investment Conference

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the private sector firms involved in the Investment Conference scheduled for May 2008. (AQO 2269/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The invitation process is underway and the Office of the First and deputy First Ministers has issued a "Save the Date" letter to over 250 targeted US CEOs. This letter did not include a response requirement, however, already interest from Executives in attending the conference is strong.

Formal invitations were issued with an RSVP request, w/c 18 February, and the number of acceptances is expected to rise.

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.

Requests to participate/speak have also gone to existing investors and when permission is received, their names will be disclosed.

Road Signage

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide a timescale within which his department will erect appropriate signage at the border between the A1 and M1, to indicate entry into and exit from Northern Ireland. (AQW 4312/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: This question was originally asked of Department for Regional Development but was transferred to DETI.

Policy relating to tourism signage at the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is led by District Councils. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board wrote to each of the border Councils in October 2007 asking them to consider "Welcome to Northern Ireland" signage as part of their annual tourist signing audit. I understand that Newry Council are actively working with Roads Service of the Department of Regional Development to secure "Welcome to Newry & Mourne" signs at the border crossing with Co. Louth

Northern Ireland Energy Holdings

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the discussions he has had with Northern Ireland Energy Holdings, in relation to the company's financial payback to Northern Ireland Electricity. (AQW 4313/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DETI officials were briefed on, but were not involved in detailed discussions with Northern Ireland Energy Holdings (NIEH) in relation to their 2007/08 contribution to electricity prices in Northern Ireland. The question of any surplus or deficit from the NIEH operation of the Moyle electricity interconnector is subject to regulatory scrutiny and control by the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation.

Northern Ireland Energy Holdings

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the discussions that have taken place between his department, the Utility Regulator and Northern Ireland Energy Holdings, in relation to a possible further payment to Northern Ireland Electricity. (AQW 4314/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: No formal discussions have taken place between DETI, the Utility Regulator and Northern Ireland Energy Holdings (NIEH) on the issue of payments to NIE. It is the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation that determines the extent to which any surplus or deficit from the NIEH operation of the

Moyle electricity interconnector is channelled back to customers via the electricity tariff.

Northern Ireland Energy Holdings

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to indicate what assessment he has made of the level of savings passed to customers, as a result of Northern Ireland Energy Holding's ownership of the electricity and gas interconnectors. (AQW 4315/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulator (NIAUR) has provided DETI with assessment of the performance of Northern Ireland Energy Holdings (NIEH) operations of the energy interconnectors.

For the past three years the Moyle interconnector has had a deficit on operating costs but has not called on Northern Ireland Electricity customers to pay for this. Instead NIEH has used its reserves to fund this shortfall - £3.5million 2007/08; £9.4million 2006/07 and £12.4million 2005/06. Had NIEH not done so, customers would have had to pay for this through an additional charge for electricity.

With regard to the gas interconnector NIEH has paid back to shippers (and ultimately to customers) £1.48million in January 2007 and £1.12million in January 2008.

Northern Ireland Energy Holdings

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make a statement on the investment of £10.6m, made by Northern Ireland Electricity Holdings, in the Renewable Energy Fund, Platina. (AQW 4316/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Northern Ireland Energy Holdings (NIEH), in agreement with the Northern Ireland Authority for Energy Regulation (NIAUR), have initiated a European Renewable Energy Fund aimed at helping meet EU renewable energy targets, as well as delivering a return for Northern Ireland energy consumers. The aim is to deliver a return by investing in low-risk renewable energy projects over a five year period followed by a realisation period of 5 to 7 years. NIEH have earmarked £11.5m to this fund which is managed by Platina Finance, and which currently totals £53.5m. An announcement of investments in projects is expected shortly.

Northern Ireland Energy Holdings

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm whether or not he was consulted on the investment of £10.6m, made by Northern Ireland Energy Holdings, in the Renewable Energy Fund, Platina. (AQW 4317/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Northern Ireland Energy Holdings did discuss their proposal for a private equity renewable energy fund with the former Secretary of State, Peter Hain, MP.

The proposed investment was agreed with the Northern Ireland Authority for Energy Regulation (NIAUR) within the regulatory framework for the Moyle electricity interconnector.

GAA as a Tourism Product

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the action his department is taking to promote Gaelic games as a tourism product. (AQW 4329/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Responsibility for promoting Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) tournaments and games rests with the GAA. Where matches attract visiting spectators (generally as part of an organised competition) thereby generating visitor numbers and revenue to the economy, they have the potential to generate positive PR through word of mouth, print, radio and television.

Over the past two years, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, has been developing, in partnership with Sport Northern Ireland, a new 10-year Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation in Northern Ireland. The contribution of sport generally, including matches and tournaments, to tourism 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, including Gaelic games, with links to relevant websites is available on Tourism Ireland's www.discoverireland.com website.

Film-Making Location

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the measures being taken to market Northern Ireland as a location for film-making. (AQW 4356/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In April 2007, the Northern Ireland Screen Commission (NI Screen) launched its second three year strategy to develop the local film and television industry. Invest NI is supporting the the strategy with

£12.4 million of funding over the period 2007 – 2010. Of this £12.4 million, £8.1 million is available as loan finance to secure inward investment in the form of high value productions, film, television and digital content, to shoot on location in Northern Ireland.

In addition, £750,000 (£250,000 per annum) is available to support the marketing activities of NI Screen where the majority of this expenditure is again targeted at attracting inward investment.

NI Screen undertakes a comprehensive range of marketing activities. These activities include, organisation of familiarisation visits to Northern Ireland for high profile international producers with potential projects; sales trips to target independent producers and studios in New York, LA, Dublin and London; attending and exhibiting at relevant trade shows e.g. Cannes; placing feature articles with trade magazines and press; strategic placement of adverts selling the funding, facility and tax benefits of Northern Ireland as a location; and production of sales tools e.g. brochures, DVD's and website.

The success of the Commission's current and previous strategies is demonstrated by the fact that they have secured over 25 productions to date including Lord Attenborough's 'Closing the Ring' and 'City of Ember'. 'City of Ember' is a \$50 million Hollywood feature film from the Tom Hank's owned production company Playtone. This film was shot in the Paint Hall in the Titanic Quarter of Belfast and is due for release in October 2008.

Manufacturing Sector

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm the total number of employees in the manufacturing sector during the years 1997/1998, 2000/2001, 2003/2004 and 2006/2007. (AQW 4360/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Table 1 below presents the number of manufacturing jobs and the net annual change between September 1997 and September 2007. All figures have been seasonally adjusted.

TABLE 1 – NUMBER OF EMPLOYEE JOBS IN MANUFACTURING: SEPTEMBER 1997 TO SEPTEMBER 2007

Year	Number of employee jobs	Annual change (jobs)
1997	107,550	-
1998	107,490	-60
1999	105,510	-1,980
2000	103,630	-1,880

Year	Number of employee jobs	Annual change (jobs)
2001	99,990	-3,640
2002	96,390	-3,600
2003	91,690	-4,700
2004	88,880	-2,810
2005	87,340	-1,540
2006	87,750	410
2007	88,180	420

Figures relate to the September quarter each year and are rounded to the nearest 10 as a result differences in levels may not match those in the final column.

Source: Northern Ireland Quarterly Employment Survey

Manufacturing Sector

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm the total number of employees in the textiles and clothing sector during the years 1997/1998, 2000/2001, 2003/2004 and 2006/2007. (AQW 4361/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Table 1 below presents the number of employee jobs in the manufacture of textiles and clothing and the net annual change between September 1997 and September 2007.

TABLE 1. NUMBER OF EMPLOYEE JOBS IN THE MANUFACTURE OF TEXTILES AND CLOTHING: SEPTEMBER 1997 TO SEPTEMBER 2007

Year	Number of employee jobs	Annual change (jobs)
1997	23,580	-
1998	21,720	-1,860
1999	18,990	-2,730
2000	15,850	-3,150
2001	12,640	-3,200
2002	11,450	-1,200
2003	8,470	-2,970
2004	6,210	-2,260
2005	4,770	-1,440
2006	3,520	-1,250
2007	3,070	-450

Figures relate to the September quarter each year and are rounded to the nearest 10 as a result differences between levels may not match those in the final column.

Source: Northern Ireland Quarterly Employment Survey

Reconnect Household Renewable Energy Programme

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of applications for the Reconnect Household Renewable Energy Programme in the East Antrim constituency, in the last financial year. (AQW 4425/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In the period since the launch of Reconnect (July 2006) to the end of February 2008 there have been 330 applications received in the East Antrim constituency area.

Tourist Accommodation

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the incentives his department is offering to hoteliers to improve tourist accommodation in the Lagan Valley constituency. (AQW 4459/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI has a comprehensive range of support available to the hotel sector throughout Northern Ireland, including those located or intending to locate in the Lagan Valley Constituency. This includes advice and grant support for strategic and process improvement (Capability Development) and financial support for product development (Capital Development).

There is an extensive range of Capability Programmes available. Invest NI support includes the training and development of staff, management improvement, development of marketing, process and energy efficiency, e-enablement, the development of information systems, knowledge management, energy efficiency and environmental practices. These and other capability programmes can be delivered to meet the individual requirements of the client company.

Invest NI can provide Capital Support including loans or preference shares and grants for tourist accommodation projects with a clearly defined strategy for growth. Capital assistance can be considered for new builds and expansions of hotels that are in support of the NITB Signature Projects or Winning Themes.

Assistance offered by Invest NI for the development of the tourism accommodation sector in Northern Ireland is detailed on the Invest NI website. This may be accessed through the following link: http://www.investni.com/tourism_support_report.pdf,

Tourism Numbers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of tourists that visited Northern Ireland in 2005 and 2006; and (ii) the country of origin of these visitors. (AQW 4568/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It is estimated that 1,972,000 visitors came to Northern Ireland in 2005 while 1,979,000 visitors came in 2006. The country of origin of these visitors is outlined in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1: COUNTRY OF ORIGIN OF VISITORS IN 2005 AND 2006

Total Visitors to Northern Ireland by Home Country ¹ 2005/2006			
	2005 (000s)	2006 (000s)	% Change
Great Britain ¹	1,308	1,281	-2
England and Wales	934	914	-2
Scotland	374	368	-2
Irish Republic	271	277	+2
Europe	176	209	+19
France	21	34	+62
Spain	16	30	+88
Germany	42	40	-5
Netherlands	17	19	+12
Italy	14	24	+71
Nordics ²	16	21	+31
Other Europe*	50	41	-18
North America	145	145	-
USA	105	115	+10
Canada	40	30	-25
Australia/New Zealand	47	42	-11
Elsewhere*	24	25	+4
Total:	1,972	1,979	-

¹ England, Scotland and Wales are often referred to as constituent countries of the UK.

² Nordic countries include Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland and Iceland.

* Small sub-samples do not allow for a more detailed market profile for Other Europe and Elsewhere.

Debt Relief Order

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide a timescale within which

the Debt Relief Order will be implemented in Northern Ireland. (AQW 4596/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Should policy analysis and consultation show that there is merit in bringing in a Debt Relief Scheme in Northern Ireland I would propose to introduce a Bill during the 2009/10 session and to have a scheme in operation by 2011/12.

ENVIRONMENT

Planning Applications

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment, since the introduction of draft Planning Policy Statement 14 (PPS14) on 16 March 2006, to detail the number of planning applications submitted for social housing in rural areas that may qualify under CTY6 of PPS14; and the number of these applications that have been approved. (AQW 3928/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I regret that the Planning Service's current IT system does not record applications in sufficient detail to provide the information requested. Accurate figures for the years in question could only be provided through a manual exercise at a disproportionate cost.

Meeting Requests

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of meeting requests she has received since May 2007. (AQW 4064/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have received 247 meeting requests since May 2007.

Bottled Water

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the amount of money that her department has spent on bottled water, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4158/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has spent the following on bottled water in the last 3 years:

- £52,764.63 in 2004/05
- £60,975.56 in 2005/06
- £69,820.51 in 2006/07.

Expenditure on bottled water within my Department has recently been the subject of a review, the outcome of which is that bottled water and water coolers are to

be withdrawn across my departmental offices as soon as possible, with the exception of conference rooms and public reception areas where no alternative supply is available.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Cree asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the actions she is taking to address the impact the delay in the Review of Public Administration is having on the morale of staff in local councils and planning offices; and to make a statement to alleviate staff concerns about their future employment options. (AQW 4189/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I recognise the concerns staff may have due to the current uncertainty on the future shape of local government and that is why I also recognise it is important that the review of the local government aspects of the RPA is concluded as quickly as possible. However, it is also important that the Executive takes the time to get the decisions right.

As I have previously indicated, the views expressed by stakeholders, Members of the Assembly and the Environment Committee in response to the Emerging Findings that I published on 18 October 2007 were all shared with relevant Ministerial colleagues during November and December. I have been working closely with Ministerial colleagues since then to consider those views and agree a way forward. Those discussions continue, and it is my intention to report to the Executive and announce decisions to the Assembly and public as soon as possible.

European Landscape Convention

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her department's plans to implement the European Landscape Convention. (AQW 4205/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The United Kingdom is considered to already fulfil the essential requirements of the Convention. Given this, and current resource limitations, my Department is not drawing up a specific implementation plan at this stage. Instead, we will take opportunities as they arise to examine relevant policies and practices to identify the scope for conserving and enhancing our landscapes for the benefit of all.

Written Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of written questions she has

answered in each month since May 2007.

(AQW 4212/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of questions I have answered since May 2007 is broken down as follows:

Month	Number
May	16
June	100
July	60
September	56
October	111
November	95
December	70
January	61
February	113
March	7
Total	689

Planning Policy

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of the Environment what her assessment is of the definition of 'Open Space', as set out in Planning Policy Statement 8: Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation'. (AQW 4258/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The definition of open space for the purposes of PPS 8 is set out in Annex A of that document. I am content with the provision of this Annex which advises that open space is taken to mean all open space of public value and which includes a typology illustrating the broad range of such spaces.

Waste Management Licensing Regulations

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of the Environment (i) whether or not the dumping of sewage sludge at three separate locations within Baronscourt Woodlands, Duke of Abercorn's estate in Strabane District, is in compliance with the Waste Management Licensing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003; and (ii) to detail what inspections have been carried out by the Environment and Heritage service to ensure that these regulations are being fully complied with. (AQW 4262/08)

The Minister of the Environment:

- (i) The landspreading of sewage sludge is currently taking place at four locations within the Baronscourt Estate in Strabane District. This activity is in compliance with the Waste

Management Licensing Regulations (NI) 2003 and has been registered as exempt.

- (ii) EHS inspected these sites on 24 January 2007, 9 August 2007 and 27 November 2007 and recorded that the waste operator was complying fully with the Regulations.

Planning Regulations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the relevant planning regulations that would prevent the application for 43 apartments at 24 - 30 Manse Road, Newtownards (X/2008/0024) from being processed. (AQW 4264/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There are no planning regulations that would prevent the application from being processed.

Tree Preservation

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration she is giving to placing a tree preservation order on beech trees, adjacent to the planning application (X/2008/0024) for apartments and houses at 24 - 30 Manse Road, Newtownards. (AQW 4265/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Two planning applications have been received for the site at 24-30 Manse Road, Newtownards, one for houses and the other for apartments. Whilst the applicant has shown that some of the mature trees along the boundary of the application site will be retained, a number will require felling to facilitate development. The Department has arranged to survey the site and assess the condition of the trees and thereby consider the appropriateness of placing a Tree Preservation Order on the site.

Programme of Assimilation

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment whether or not she will consider a programme of assimilation for foreign national road users on the rules of the road. (AQW 4279/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The preparation of a revised Highway Code for Northern Ireland is progressing well, and I intend to publish the final version by the end of April 2008.

My Department's road safety advertising agency has been asked to prepare a media plan to ensure that all road users are made aware of the new version and encouraged to obtain a copy. The needs of foreign

national road users will be taken into account in the preparation of this plan.

The revised Highway Code will also be placed on the Department's website, and be available to all road users for downloading free of charge.

When the revised version of the Highway Code has been completed, my Department will consider how foreign-language versions of the Code might best be made available to those who need them, having regard to the costs of such translations, the availability of the necessary funding, and other relevant factors.

The needs of foreign national road users in relation to road safety generally will also be considered as part of the development of the new road safety strategy.

Livestock Carcasses

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the advice provided to district councils in relation to the removal of livestock carcasses that are left to decay along public highways. (AQW 4373/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Environment and Heritage Service has no statutory responsibility for this issue and therefore has not provided advice to district councils about the removal of livestock carcasses left on public highways.

Review of Old Mineral Permissions

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to the answer to AQW 4048/08, to provide details in relation to the review of old mineral permissions (ROMPS); and to outline when this review will be (i) carried out; and (ii) completed. (AQW 4393/08)

The Minister of the Environment: It is generally accepted that there are a number of mineral planning permissions dating from the 1970s and 1980s that are deficient in effective environmental conditions. Indeed, a number of dormant quarries have been able to return to active status, by virtue of their old permissions, without any review of their operating conditions.

In line with the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland, the Department of the Environment has introduced legislation through The Planning Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 to require the initial review of old mineral permissions (ROMPs). Because of the distinctive characteristics of mineral extraction and processing, it is accepted that planning control of mineral extraction cannot be a one-for-all process like other forms of development; but that mineral permissions should be subject to periodic review, to enable controls to be updated.

The Department will be undertaking an initial review of mineral permissions in two phases which it is intended will commence in the autumn. The exact date is dependant on the finalisation of amendments to the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999 to allow for ROMPs applications to be subject to the Regulations. It is anticipated that a public consultation of the amended EIA Regulations will be published before the summer.

The legislation provides a mechanism to review all existing planning conditions thus providing an important opportunity to secure improved operating and environmental standards within the quarrying industry. The new provisions, when commenced, will initiate the review of all mineral permissions in Northern Ireland to ensure that they have planning conditions that comply with modern environmental standards and ensure that dormant quarries cannot be returned to use before their planning conditions have been reviewed and environmentally acceptable operating standards secured.

My Department has identified the need for a centralised, dedicated team in Planning Service Headquarters to coordinate the review and process future ROMPs applications. This team will begin processing ROMPs applications received after regulations referred to above are in place.

The review process is a continuous one and as such it is not envisaged that there will be a completion date. Rather, the Department will be undertaking the initial review of mineral permissions in the two phases, dealing with the oldest permissions first. Thereafter, mineral sites will be subject to periodic review 15 years from the date of the initial review or if a minerals planning permission is neither Phase I or Phase II, 15 years after the date upon which the most recent mineral permission was granted.

Mullaghglass Landfill

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 3505/08, to give a timescale within which the Planning Service will make a decision in relation to Mullaghglass landfill and its compliance with condition 20 of the planning permission. (AQW 4395/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Service propose to bring an opinion on the planning application to construct a footway before a meeting of Lisburn City Council on 7th April 2008.

Bin-Tax Pilot Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the plans she has to introduce a 'Bin-Tax' pilot scheme, similar to that introduced in Great Britain. (AQW 4436/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have no plans to introduce a 'Bin-Tax' pilot scheme in Northern Ireland. The Waste Management Strategy for Northern Ireland, published by my department, focuses on the prevention of waste and considers the types of measures that may be employed to encourage this. One such measure is the provision of legal powers to district councils to charge for the collection of residual household waste. While the Strategy commits my Department to consulting on this matter by 2009, policy development in this area is at a very early stage and I will follow the progress of the pilot schemes in Great Britain with interest.

Minerals Development

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4048/08, to detail the number of Areas of Constraint on Minerals Development (ACMDs). (AQW 4472/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Neither of the existing Development Plans which relate to the Belfast Hills area, namely the Belfast Urban Area Plan 2001 and the Lisburn Area Plan 2001, include Areas of Constraint on Minerals Development (ACMD) designations.

This designation is, however, proposed for the Belfast Hills and other areas in the Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (dBMAP). The proposed ACMD designation is identified as being the same areas as those identified as Area of High Scenic Value and the Lagan Valley Regional Park in the draft plan.

The proposed boundaries for ACMD designations for the Belfast Hills are set out in the dBMAP under the following designation references:

1. Designation Ca 02/10 Area Of Constraint On Mineral Developments: Belfast Hills-Divis/Ligoniel Site of Local Nature Conservation Interest, Belfast Countryside
2. Designation Ln 03/45 Area Of Constraint On Mineral Developments: Belfast Hills - White Mountain Site of Local Nature Conservation Interest, Lisburn Countryside
3. Designation Ln 03/45 Area Of Constraint On Mineral Developments: Belfast Hills - White Mountain Site of Local Nature Conservation Interest, Lisburn Countryside

Illegal Waste

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm that the Government of the Republic of Ireland has agreed to the repatriation of illegal waste from any of the sites in Northern Ireland where waste originating in the Republic of Ireland had been dumped. (AQW 4518/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Environment and Heritage Service has received a letter from Dublin City Council (which is the competent authority for these matters in the Republic of Ireland) indicating that they will appoint a contractor to remove waste from two illegal dumps in Northern Ireland and take this to a landfill site in the Republic of Ireland. Officials from both jurisdictions are meeting in the near future to discuss how these operations will proceed and to agree methodology.

Rose Energy

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4394/08, to confirm if her department will grant planning permission to Rose Energy for a chicken waste plant. (AQW 4650/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Rose Energy have not yet submitted a planning application. My Department will determine any future planning application in accordance with procedures laid down in statute.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Departmental Decentralisation

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of jobs that will be decentralised to locations outside Belfast, broken down by department, in the next three years. (AQW 3869/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development plans to move ten posts to Loughry College in Cookstown within the next six months. These will form part of the new Agri-environment Scheme Management Branch at the college.

An independent review of policy on the location of public sector jobs, including civil service jobs, has been established in December 2007. The review and the terms of reference were unanimously approved by the Executive as a means of helping Ministers to come to an agreed approach on the whole issue of dispersal.

The review team, chaired by Professor Sir George Bain has been asked to put forward a set of practical recommendations for the longer term approach to location of public sector jobs in Northern Ireland and to propose an agenda for action. The review is due to report in Summer 2008 when the Executive will have the opportunity to consider the team's findings and recommendations.

The terms of reference and membership of the review team can be accessed at http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/review_of_policy_on_the_location_of_public_sector_jobs_in_ni.pdf

Sickness Record

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2846/08, to detail the number of staff from each Government department with (i) a live warning; or (ii) who are under notice of dismissal, at January 2008, that have been the subject of previous disciplinary procedures resulting from an unacceptable sickness record. (AQW 3937/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The details requested in AQW 3937/08 are set out in the attached table. For the purpose of answering this question it was decided to include those staff who, at January 2008, were subject to inefficiency action and have been the subject of previous inefficiency procedures in the 2 years preceding the start of the first warning letter in the current inefficiency procedure. The timescale varies from the first warning letter to the actual dismissal stage in each individual case, depending on the particular circumstances of each case.

Department (including their Executive Agency & NDPBs where available)	Overall number of staff with a live warning or under notice of dismissal at January 2008, and who also were the subject of previous inefficiency procedures in the 2 years preceding the start of the first warning letter in the current inefficiency procedure
OFMDFM	NIL
DHSSPS	1
DCAL	NIL
DE	2
DFP	38
DRD	20
DEL	9
DETI	11

Department (including their Executive Agency & NDPBs where available)	Overall number of staff with a live warning or under notice of dismissal at January 2008, and who also were the subject of previous inefficiency procedures in the 2 years preceding the start of the first warning letter in the current inefficiency procedure
DSD	Not readily available*
DOE	12
DARD	48
Total	141

* DSD have advised that figures could only be produced at disproportionate costs to the Department.

Rates Relief

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm whether or not people aged over 70 (i) will be required to apply for the 20% rate relief; or (ii) will qualify automatically, given that the necessary information about this group will be known to other departments. (AQW 4146/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Due to data sharing limitations, applicants will initially be required to complete a simple application form in order to enable the Lone Pensioner Allowance to be place in April this year. Help will be made available to those applicants who may require assistance with the application process.

However, my Department is currently examining the possibility of introducing enhanced data sharing powers to allow for the exchange of relevant information between Government agencies. It is hoped that such powers may lead to the automatic award of this allowance (and others) in the future. This will require primary legislation and the completion of a privacy impact assessment to ensure that the interests of the public are safeguarded.

Vacant Properties

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he is taking to ensure that residential properties that are claimed to be vacant, are actually vacant. (AQW 4170/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I would refer the Member to his previous question AQW 3821/08 and my reply of 26 February 2008.

Rates Relief

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on the action he has taken to increase rates relief uptake by qualifying home owners, following his statement to the Assembly on the 27 November 2007. (AQW 4171/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In line with the outcomes of the Executive Review of Domestic Rating, my Department has commissioned an urgent study, which is being led by Help the Aged/ Age Concern, to bring forward actions that can be taken to support Government awareness and take-up strategies for next year in relation to rate relief provision. Their first findings report is expected at the end of March 2008.

In addition to raising awareness and promoting the reliefs that are available, I will also look at the potential for making a real difference through acquiring more comprehensive data sharing powers in primary legislation from April 2009. This would allow better targeting of support, with the ultimate aim of introducing more automation to the process, which is what I consider to be effective joined up government. The introduction of data-sharing powers to facilitate uptake of rate relief, would of course be accompanied the completion of privacy impact assessments in order to protect the interests of the public and ensure the safeguarding of personal data.

Ulster-Scots Speakers

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of Ulster-Scots speakers, according to the last census, who 'speak, read, write and understand Ulster-Scots'. (AQW 4179/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The information requested is not available from the 2001 Census as the language question in the 2001 Census was specific to Irish. Proposals for the 2011 Census, including the topics to be included in the 2011 Census questionnaire, will be presented in the form of an Executive Consultative paper in the autumn of this year.

Substance Abuse

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of fatalities attributed to (i) aerosol; and (ii) substance, abuse, in each of the last 3 years, broken down by (a) age group; (b) sex; and (c) geographical location. (AQW 4192/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is not possible to answer the question directly therefore

information is provided on deaths due to “volatile substance abuse” and separately all drug-related related deaths.

Table 1 below gives the number of deaths related to “volatile substance abuse” in Northern Ireland from 2003 to 2005. These figures are based on independent research carried out by St George’s Hospital, University of London. Details on deaths are taken from information provided by the State Pathologist’s Department, HM Coroner for Northern Ireland, and the General Register Office for Northern Ireland. The researchers define a “volatile substance abuse” death as one which involved the deliberate inhalation of gas, aerosol propellants, solvents in glue or other solvents and which would not have occurred if the deceased had not taken this substance.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF DEATHS RELATED TO VOLATILE SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN NORTHERN IRELAND, 2003-2005 (ST GEORGE’S HOSPITAL, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON)

Occurrence Year	Number of Deaths
2003	5
2004	1
2005	5

In addition tables 2-4 below give the number of drug-related deaths¹ by sex, age and Health and Social Services Board. The figures relate to deaths due to misuse of both illegal (e.g. a heroin overdose) and legal drugs (e.g. a paracetamol overdose).

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF DRUG-RELATED¹ DEATHS IN NORTHERN IRELAND BY SEX, 2004-2006

Sex	Registration Year		
	2004	2005	2006
Male	27	48	51
Female	21	36	40

TABLE 3: NUMBER OF DRUG-RELATED¹ DEATHS BY YEAR IN NORTHERN IRELAND BY AGE, 2004-2006

Age	Registration Year		
	2004	2005	2006
Under 18	1	5	1
18-21	2	3	2
22-25	1	8	6
26-29	1	5	4
30-39	12	18	28
40+	31	45	50

Population Growth

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the current estimated (i) population growth rate; and (ii) total population, for (a) 2011; (b) 2021; and (c) 2031. (AQW 4213/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The table below shows the mid-year population estimate for Northern Ireland for 2006 and the 2006 based principal population projection for Northern Ireland for 2011, 2021 and 2031.

Year	Population ¹ (millions)
2006	1.74
2011	1.81
2021	1.92
2031	2.00

¹ The mid-year population estimates and population projections are generally quoted in rounded form, this is because population counts from the census and subsequent updates involving births, deaths and migration cannot be precise. In general the precision of the population estimates could be considered to be no better than to the nearest 100

The table below shows the percentage population increase from 2006 to 2011, 2011 to 2021 and 2021 to 2031 and the equivalent annualised increase for these periods

Period	Percentage Population Increase	Annualised Percentage Increase
2006 - 2011	4.0%	0.8%
2011 - 2021	6.1%	0.6%
2021 - 2031	4.0%	0.4%

Public Records Office

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether or not the current workforce in the Public Records Office meets equality provisions as set out in the Northern Ireland Act 1998; and to outline whether or not recent equality proofing has been undertaken in relation to the make up of the workforce. (AQW 4237/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act requires public authorities in carrying out their functions in Northern Ireland to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between a number of different groups. The Act does not in itself impose any obligations in terms of the make up of a workforce. Several pieces of legislation outlaw discrimination in employment on the grounds of gender, ethnic origin,

sexual orientation, age, disability, religious belief and political opinion. Only the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998 requires employers to monitor their workforce and, where a lack of fair participation is discovered, to take steps to address it. The Northern Ireland Civil Service is treated as a single employer for the purposes of the Fair Employment and Treatment Order and therefore the profile of individual Departments or Agencies is not gathered.

Corporation Tax

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the contingency plans he has within the context of the Budget 2008-2011 to cover a loss of revenue in the event that the Northern Ireland Assembly is granted the ability to vary the rate of corporation tax during the lifetime of that Budget. (AQW 4243/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: On 29 January 2008 the Assembly approved the programme of expenditure proposals for 2008-09 to 2010-11 as set out in the Budget document, laid before the Assembly on 22 January 2008.

These spending plans will be subject to review as more up to date information becomes available and any pressures emerge, through the in-year monitoring process and subsequent Budgets.

The Review of Tax Policy in Northern Ireland led by Sir David Varney rejected the case for a lower rate of corporation tax in Northern Ireland based on the costs and benefits to the UK as a whole. It also suggested that the broader business environment was more important in influencing business investment decisions than the corporation tax rate.

In the event that the ability to vary the rate of corporation tax was made available to the Executive, I would make strong representations to HMT to ensure that priority front line services would not suffer as a consequence.

Capital Realisation Task Force

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give a timescale within which the Report of the Capital Realisation Task Force, which was presented to him in December 2007, will be published; and to detail the reasons for the delay in publication. (AQW 4286/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Report of the Capital Realisation Taskforce will be published in the near future. Since receiving the report in December 2007, the Executive has considered in detail its recommendations and has welcomed these in principle. Further work commissioned by the Executive on the practical arrangements for structures and protocols is now nearing completion.

Legal Fees

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail how much was paid in legal fees to defend the failed application for judicial review by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) in relation to Article 2 of the Law Reform (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. (AQW 4289/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: To date, no legal fees have been paid in respect of the defence of this matter, which is presently the subject of an appeal.

Non-Ministerial Car Pool

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the usage of the non-Ministerial car pool in January 2008 by (i) department; and (ii) civil service grade, broken down into (a) number of bookings; and (b) journey time. (AQW 4295/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The attached table details non ministerial car journeys by department and grade for period 1 January to 31 January 2008.

NON MINISTERIAL CAR JOURNEYS BY DEPARTMENT AND GRADE FOR PERIOD 01/01/08 TO 31/01/08

DEPT	DE	DFP	DHSSPS	OFM	DSD	DRD	DETI	DEL	DCAL	DOE	DARD	Total no of Journeys/ hours by grade
HOCS	n/a	n/a	n/a	17	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	17
Total journey time				12.35								12.35
PERM SEC	6	37	2	0	2	2	5	17	2	0	5	78
Total journey time	14.00	64.00	3.50	0.00	2.45	2.00	4.4	21.35	1.1	0	5.35	118.15

DEPT	DE	DFP	DHSSPS	OFM	DSD	DRD	DETI	DEL	DCAL	DOE	DARD	Total no of Journeys/ hours by grade
GRADE 3	50	21	7	11	2	0	15	3	3	2	0	114
Total journey time	58.15	29.00	11.5	23.1	1.15	0.00	19.45	3.45	3.45	2.35	0.00	151.60
GRADE 5	0	11	16	9	4	0	3	8	0	1	5	57
Total journey time	0	12.1	26.2	8.25	7.40	0	2.15	12.3	0	1.15	8.25	77.75
GRADE 7	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Total journey time	0.00	2.15	1.55	5.45	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	5.45	14.60
STAFF OFFICER	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	0	0	0	5.00
Total journey time	0	0	0	0	0	0	2.25	1.35	0	0	0	3.60
VISITOR	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	6	0	10
Total journey time	2.15	0	0	0	1.55	2.5	0	0	0	8.1	0	14.30

Civil Service Staff

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of Northern Ireland Civil Service staff (i) who have requested a transfer from Belfast to Derry/Londonderry; and (ii) who have been granted a welfare priority rating. (AQW 4320/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of staff who have requested a transfer from Belfast to Londonderry is 221. Nine of these staff have been granted a welfare priority rating.

Decentralisation of Civil Service

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what consideration he has given to the decentralisation of Northern Ireland Civil Service jobs from Belfast to other areas; and to detail the criteria used to determine the location of decentralised services. (AQW 4321/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: An independent review on the wider issue of policy on the location of public sector jobs was established in December 2007. The review and the terms of reference were unanimously approved by the Executive as a means of helping Ministers to come to an agreed approach on the whole issue of dispersal of jobs. The review team has been asked therefore to put forward a set of practical recommendations for the longer term approach to location in Northern Ireland, including civil service jobs, and to propose an agenda for action. The terms of reference and membership of the review team can be accessed at http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/review_of_policy_on_the_location_of_public_sector_jobs_in_ni.pdf

At this stage it is too early to speculate on the outcome or any determining criteria. It is, however, an opportune time to consider the distribution of public sector jobs generally in light of the Executive's clearly stated priority of encouraging private sector investment and growing the economy.

The review is due to report in Summer 2008 when the Executive will consider the team's findings and recommendations. In the meantime a framework to underpin decision making on the location of bodies related to the Review of Public Administration was published in November 2007. All public sector organisations including the civil service and all central government departments are encouraged to adopt the guiding principles and methodology set out in the framework in any decision making process. Details of the framework are available at http://www.rpani.gov.uk/estates_framework.pdf

Rates Revaluation

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of requests for revaluation reviews in Strangford constituency that resulted in a reduction of rates; and (ii) the average number of requests for revaluation reviews that resulted in a reduction of rates, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 4347/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I can confirm that in the Strangford constituency a reduction in valuation was granted in 991 domestic and non-domestic cases completed from 1 April 2007 to date.

The information requested in the second part of the question is provided in the attached table.

Veterinary Office in Ards

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the alternative sites that are being considered for the relocation of the Veterinary Office in Ards. (AQW 4348/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Several sites in Newtownards and one in Bangor were considered for the relocation of the Veterinary office. The exact details of the sites considered are commercially sensitive. The Department has now successfully agreed terms for premises in Kiltonga Industrial Estate, in Newtownards and we anticipate that the replacement office will be operational in approximately 6 months.

Fuel Duty

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the representations made to the Chancellor of the Exchequer in relation to his intentions to raise fuel duty by 2p from 1 April 2008. (AQW 4377/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The setting of duty rates on fuel is a Reserved Matter for determination by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The Pre-Budget Report 2007 confirmed that fuel duty would increase by a further 2 pence in April 2008.

I recently wrote to the Chancellor on the 17th January 2008 indicating that the increase in fuel duty would have a negative impact, particularly in the more rural regions of Northern Ireland. I therefore asked him to consider some form of fuel duty derogation.

Departments' Assets

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to (i) provide details on; and (b) list the value of, all assets, under the control of Northern Ireland departments, that have been sold and reinvested, in each of the last ten years. (AQW 4396/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The sale of public sector assets, which are underutilised or surplus to requirements, is an important mechanism through which resources can be used more efficiently and effectively as well as acting as a source of additional funding for investment in public sector infrastructure.

The table attached sets out the level of asset sales by each Northern Ireland department over the past ten years. However the figures prior to 2001-02 are on a different accounting and budgeting basis to subsequent years and hence are not directly comparable with those for later years.

More detailed information regarding the specific assets sold by each Northern Ireland department is not held centrally.

ASSET SALES BY NI DEPARTMENT 1997-98 TO 2007-08 (£ MILLION)

	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
DARD	0.7	0.8	0.2	0.7	1.8	0.6	0.2	2.8	5.7	3.7	3.2
DCAL			0.1		0.1	0.0	0.1	0.2		0.2	0.1
DE				0.0	0.1	0.0	0.6	1.1	7.4	22.5	15.2
DEL	0.1	2.0	3.3	0.0	0.2	0.2					
DETI					8.4	10.0	19.9	21.7	24.3	28.6	30.6
DFP	0.0	0.1		0.0		0.1	0.0	24.8	1.5	1.6	0.1
DHSSPS	1.2	1.9	0.8	2.5	2.1	1.7	5.0	9.9	10.8	26.4	8.7
DOE	0.0	0.3	1.9	2.1	0.5	2.7	3.2	1.7	0.3	0.3	1.0
DRD	1.3	1.3	3.0	3.3	6.2	3.1	1.7	16.8	9.9	12.8	9.4
DSD	7.1	6.4	7.8	5.5	101.7	131.2	179.3	115.7	110.5	162.3	148.5
Total	10.5	12.7	17.1	14.1	121.2	149.5	210.1	194.8	170.4	258.3	216.9

- Figures for 1997-98 to 2000-01 are not directly comparable with those for 2001-02 to 2007-08
- 2007-08 figures are based on the December Monitoring position.

Peace III Funding

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail, for each government department, the measures relating to Peace III funding to which groups can currently apply. (AQW 4453/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: PEACE III comprises two operational Priorities and a third, Technical Assistance Priority. Each of the operational Priorities delivers funding through two Themes:—

Priority 1 – Reconciling Communities

- Theme 1.1 – Building positive relationships (Regional and Local elements)
- Theme 1.2 – Acknowledging and dealing with the past

Priority 2 – Contributing to a shared society

- Theme 2.1 – Creating shared public spaces
- Theme 2.2 – Key institutional capacities are developed for a shared society

Themes 1.1 (Regional element) and 2.1 (Creating shared public spaces) are currently open for applications. Details of these calls are available on the SEUPB website (www.seupb.eu).

Theme 1.1 (Local element) is open to applications from Local Authorities and County Councils who have been asked to apply with their local action plans by end March 2008. It is anticipated that at least some of these local action plans will include proposals whereby the local authorities would subsequently seek funding applications to the cluster from local groups.

SEUPB intend the remaining Themes to open by April 2008.

Population Demographics

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the proportion of the population under the age of 18 years. (AQW 4545/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The latest estimate of the Northern Ireland resident population relates to mid-year 2006; for persons aged under 18 years the estimate was 432,000 people, which represents 25% of the Northern Ireland population.

Background Note

1. Mid-year population estimates are published annually by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. The estimates refer to the usually resident population at 30 June of the given year. Ages relate to age at last birthday. The most recent estimates, relating to 2006, were published in July 2007. Figures for mid-year 2007 will be published in summer 2008.

2. The mid-year population estimates are generally quoted in rounded form, this is because population counts from the census and subsequent updates involving births, deaths and migration cannot be precise. In general the precision of the population estimates could be considered to be no better than to the nearest 100.

3. This background note is fully disclosable.

Drafted by: Dr David Marshall (NISRA)

Cleared by: Mr Robert Beatty (NISRA)

29 February 2008

Middletown Autism Project

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm if he will submit the details of the Middletown Autism Project, including (i) costings; (ii) consultation outcomes; and (iii) strategic plans, to the Northern Ireland Audit Office. (AQW 4615/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Northern Ireland Audit Office is totally independent of Government and has the statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and other public sector bodies use the resources allocated to them. All information is available to the Audit Office whose staff can examine it whenever they wish. Departments cannot direct the Audit Office to investigate particular issues but it remains open for any individual or organisation to draw to the Audit Office's attention any matter which causes them concern.

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of incidents of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome over the last ten years, broken down by (i) Health and Social Care Trust; and (ii) Health and Social Services Board. (AQW 4341/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The tables below give the number of deaths due to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome^{1,2} in each Health & Social Care Trust and Health & Social Services Board, over the last ten years.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF DEATHS DUE TO SUDDEN INFANT DEATH SYNDROME^{1,2} REGISTERED IN NORTHERN IRELAND, BY HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE TRUST AREA, 1997-2006

Health and Social Care Trust	1997-2006
Belfast	7
South Eastern	4

Health and Social Care Trust	1997-2006
Northern	3
Southern	2
Western	2
Northern Ireland	18

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF DEATHS DUE TO SUDDEN INFANT DEATH SYNDROME^{1,2} REGISTERED IN NORTHERN IRELAND, BY HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES BOARD, 1997-2006

Health and Social Services Board	1997-2006
Eastern	11
Northern	3
Southern	2
Western	2
Northern Ireland	18

¹ International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision code R95 for years 2001-2006 and Ninth Revision code 798.0 for years 1997-2000.

² Only infants aged less than one year old are included.

Stillbirths

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of still births in each of the Health and Social Care Trusts, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4343/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The table below gives the number of stillbirths in each Health & Social Care Trust in Northern Ireland, registered in each of the last five years.

TABLE: NUMBER OF STILLBIRTHS REGISTERED IN NORTHERN IRELAND, BY HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE TRUST, 2002-2006

Health & Social Care Trust Area	Registration Year				
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Belfast	26	19	22	13	18
South Eastern	22	13	24	25	23
Northern	31	23	26	21	14
Southern	20	30	18	16	18
Western	23	23	23	14	16
Northern Ireland	122	108	113	89	89

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Draft Strategy on Consultation

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 605/07, to confirm whether or not the draft strategy will be ready for consultation by March 2008. (AQW 4103/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The draft Physical and Sensory Disability Strategy will not be ready for consultation by March 2008. However, elements of strategic work are underway that will inform the Strategy and significant progress is being made.

The Regional Review of Wheelchair Services is due to be complete in April 2008, a Review of Acquired Brain Injury Services has been commissioned and work is underway to identify appropriate members to take this forward; work to implement changes to adult sensory services will be complete by the end of summer 2008.

The aim is that each of these strands, and further work that will be commissioned, will feed into a Physical and Sensory Disability Strategy that will help those with a physical and/or sensory disability to lead as full and inclusive lives as possible in society.

Speech and Language Task Force

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a timescale within which the Speech and Language Taskforce will publish its report. (AQW 4104/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Regional Speech and Language Therapy Task Force completed its report and submitted it to my Department on 31 January 2008. The report is currently under consideration and I will release it as soon as I have considered it fully.

Continuous Pain Relief

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not there is a set time for a patient being prescribed continuous pain relief by their GP, before being referred to a (i) Pain Management Clinic; or (ii) Consultant/ Specialist. (AQW 4115/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is no set time for which a patient

will be prescribed continuous pain relief. It is a matter of clinical judgement as to whether or when a GP refers a patient for further investigation or treatment. Dependent on the GP's assessment a patient may be referred to a Pain Management Clinic or Specialist/Consultant for whatever further treatment they consider necessary.

Fluoridisation of Water

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm his department's intentions, in relation to the fluoridisation of the water supply. (AQW 4118/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Currently there are no plans to approve the introduction of fluoride into Northern Ireland's drinking water.

Multiple Sclerosis

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the monies allocated for people with multiple sclerosis in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4119/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is not possible to identify separately the total amount of funding allocated for people with multiple sclerosis (MS). Health and social care resources are normally allocated on a service or Programme of Care basis rather than by specific medical condition. People with MS may access a wide spectrum of health and social care, including primary and community care and acute hospital services. In particular, they benefit from the Physical and Sensory Disability Programme of Care and have access to a range of services based on a clinical assessment of their need. These services include respite, therapy services, day care services and wheelchair services.

Specific additional funding of £2 million was allocated for disease modifying therapies for people with MS in 2006/07 and 2007/08 to ensure that by March 2008 no-one will be waiting longer than 13 weeks to start treatment with these specialist drugs. Expenditure on disease modifying therapies for people with MS over the past three years was as follows:

2004/05	£4.3 million
2005/06	£4.5 million
2006/07	£5.1 million

Currently 842 patients are on treatment (including 32 whose treatment is suspended for clinical or other reasons). The total expenditure on disease modifying

therapies for people with MS is expected to be in the region of £7 million in the current financial year.

Multiple Sclerosis

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people suffering from multiple sclerosis in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4120/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of people suffering with multiple sclerosis in Northern Ireland is not currently available. However, information is available on the number of admissions to hospital where a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis was recorded. The table below provides the number of admissions for multiple sclerosis in each of the last three years to 2006/07 (the latest year for which information is available).

Diagnosis	2006/07	2005/06	2004/05
Multiple Sclerosis	1,438	1,519	1,173

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.

Children with Disabilities

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the monies allocated for children with disabilities in the Budget. (AQW 4121/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The total budget secured under the Comprehensive Spending Review for children and adults with disabilities in Northern Ireland is £8m, £11m and £24m respectively over the next 3 years. Of this £1m, £2m and £7m, has been made available for physical and sensory disability and £7m, £9m and £17m, has been made available for learning disability. This will benefit both children and adults with disabilities.

Funding of £18.5m, £17m and £17.5m for the Children and Young People's Funding Package (including the Children's Fund) has been secured to develop a wide range of services for children and young people some of whom will have a disability.

In addition, funding of £2m, £3m and £4m, over the next 3 years, has been allocated to provide services for children with complex needs to be cared for at home rather than a hospital setting.

Bamford Review

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking in relation to (i) preventative work; and (ii) early intervention, as highlighted in the Bamford Review.

(AQW 4122/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In relation to preventative work, the Promoting Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan, issued in 2003, contains 20 actions across the public sector to improve people's mental health and emotional well being. In the current year my Department made available £600,000 to support the health and social care sector and the Health Promotion Agency to implement actions which are their responsibility. It is now my intention that we update the strategy and action plan in the light of the Bamford review recommendations and of the recent work on suicide prevention. This work will be cross-Departmental.

Early intervention to minimise future problems is a key objective of the health and social care sector in general and applies equally to the fields of mental health and learning disability, as highlighted by the Bamford review. The additional funding going into mental health and learning disability services over the next three years will facilitate earlier interventions. Reducing waiting times for and improving availability of psychotherapy, increasing significantly multi-professional staff for community mental health teams and better advice and advocacy services will all improve detection and treatment times. Early intervention with children with learning disabilities is also important and better community learning disability support services will help children reach their maximum potential.

Fire Service

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the cost of training a fire officer; (ii) the starting salary of the most recently appointed fire officer; and (iii) the cost of the most recently purchased fire engine.

(AQW 4132/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) The direct cost of training of a new entrant to the fire and rescue service during the basic 14-week course, in terms of trainee and instructor salary, is £8,641. It is not possible to identify accurately the related infrastructure costs for an individual as a range of other courses for operational firefighters and officers are run concurrently at the training centre.

- (ii) The starting salary for a firefighter following initial basic training is £21,245 per annum.
- (iii) The most recently purchased fire engine cost £147,809.

Anaesthetists' Availability

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to the answer to AQW 3042/08, to confirm that an anaesthetist is available at the Ulster Hospital, Dundonald, for (i) A&E; and (ii) general surgical operations, 24 hours a day, and 7 days a week.

(AQW 4141/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has confirmed that the Ulster Hospital provides full anaesthetic cover 24 hours per day, 7 days a week to A&E, Theatres, Intensive Care, maternity services and all wards.

Home Start and Sure Start

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not funding for Home Start and Sure Start will continue on a permanent basis beyond April 2008.

(AQW 4143/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have decided to support the four locally-based Home Start projects currently being supported by the Fund for one more year until March 2009.

I understand that Sure Start, as a core programme of the Department of Education, has been mainstreamed.

Ambulance Provision

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the current ambulance provision for those previously serviced by the Mid Ulster Hospital, Magherafelt; and (ii) how this compares to the ambulance provision prior to the new arrangements in relation to A&E access at the Mid Ulster Hospital.

(AQW 4153/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The current ambulance provision in Mid-Ulster is as follows:

Ambulance Station	Accident & Emergency	Intermediate Care / Patient Care Service
Magherafelt	1 vehicle - 24 hrs x 7 days 1 vehicle - 2000 to 0800 x 7 nights 1 vehicle - 0800 to 1500 Monday to Friday (Friday finish 1430)	1 vehicle - 0830 to 1730 Monday to Friday 1 vehicle - 1230 to 2330 Monday to Friday 1 vehicle - 1000 to 2100 x Sat 1 vehicle - 1100 to 2100 x Sun
Cookstown	1 vehicle - 24 hrs x 7 days	1 vehicle - 0800 to 1600 Monday to Friday 1 vehicle - 1100 to 1900 Monday to Friday

The A&E ambulance based in Magherafelt providing additional cover from 2000 to 0800, 7 nights a week, was introduced in response to the change in A&E opening hours at the Mid-Ulster Hospital A&E department from October 2006.

Wind Energy

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the income generated by the wind turbine located at Antrim Area Hospital; and (ii) the total savings resulting for the hospital by using wind energy. (AQW 4155/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The income generated by the wind turbine located at Antrim Area Hospital from February 2005 to January 2008 is some £56k.

The total savings resulting for the hospital by using wind energy from February 2005 to January 2008 is some £186k with an associated saving of 1084.39 tonnes of Carbon Dioxide.

Out-of-Hours Services

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give a commitment that out-of-hours services in Strabane will be retained. (AQW 4167/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Currently all Out of Hours (OOH) services in Northern Ireland are subject to a review looking at their efficiency and effectiveness. As the review will not be published until May this year no decisions have been made, although no commitment can be given at this time that there will be no change to the OOH service in Strabane in the future.

Staff Demographics

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the percentage of staff in his department that is (i) male; (ii) female; and (iii) disabled, broken down by grade. (AQW 4177/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is contained in the table below. The figures relating to disabled staff may not reflect the actual numbers who meet the legal definition of “disabled” since staff are not compelled to notify the Department of any disability/long-term condition.

Grade (including analogous grades)	% Male	% Female	% Disability
AA	45.1	54.9	5.88
AO	29.2	70.8	4.42
EO2	32.84	67.16	5.22
EO1	52.83	47.17	5.66
SO	57.51	42.49	1.04
DP	56.8	43.2	2.96
7	66.3	33.7	5.43
6	88.46	11.54	7.69
SCS	65.52	34.48	3.45

Speech and Language Therapy

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children and young people currently (i) receiving; and (ii) awaiting assessment for, speech and language therapy, in each of the Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 4184/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of children and young people currently receiving speech and language therapy services is not collected centrally. However, information is available on completed waiting times for a first outpatient appointment of an episode of care with a community speech and language therapist, by length of time waiting. The length of time waiting is collected according to specific time bands, and is counted as the time elapsed between the date of the request for a first appointment being received by the speech and language therapy service and the date the first appointment took place.

Table 1 overleaf contains information for the quarter ending 31 December 2007 (the latest date for which information is available) and shows that, of the 3,246 persons who attended their first outpatient

appointment, 2,587 (80%) had waited for less than 3 months, 539 (17%) had waited between 3 and 6 months, and 120 (4%) had waited for six months or more.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF COMPLETED WAITS FOR A FIRST APPOINTMENT WITH A COMMUNITY SPEECH & LANGUAGE THERAPIST DURING QUARTER ENDING 31 DECEMBER 2007 ¹

HSC Trust	Less than 3 months		3 to 6 Months		6 months or more		All Completed Waits
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	
Belfast HSC Trust	682	89%	80	10%	6	1%	768
Northern HSC Trust	591	68%	206	24%	74	8%	871
South Eastern HSC Trust	562	90%	61	10%	4	1%	627
Southern HSC Trust	317	76%	94	23%	4	1%	415
Western HSC Trust	435	77%	98	17%	32	6%	565
Northern Ireland	2,587	80%	539	17%	120	4%	3,246

Source: DHSSPS Information returns CP3.

- 1 Information is currently provisional and may be subject to change.
- b) Information in Table 2 overleaf shows the number of children and young people awaiting an initial assessment for speech and language therapy at 31 December 2007, the latest date for which information is available.

At 31 December 2007, 1,821 children and young people were awaiting an initial assessment for speech and language therapy. Across HSC Trusts, this ranged from 227 in the South Eastern HSC Trust to 547 in the Western HSC Trust.

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE AWAITING AN INITIAL ASSESSMENT FOR SPEECH & LANGUAGE THERAPY SERVICES AT 31 DECEMBER 2007 ¹

HSC Trust	Length of Time Waiting			Total Waiting Assessment
	Less than 3 months	3 to 6 months	6 months or more	
Belfast HSC Trust ²	257	21	2	280
Northern HSC Trust	300	41	6	347
South Eastern HSC Trust	206	16	5	227

HSC Trust	Length of Time Waiting			Total Waiting Assessment
	Less than 3 months	3 to 6 months	6 months or more	
Southern HSC Trust ³	0	0	0	420
Western HSC Trust	431	86	30	547
Northern Ireland	1,194	164	43	1,821

Source: DHSSPS Information returns CP5.

- 1 Information is currently provisional and may be subject to change.
- 2 A batch of appointments in the South & East Belfast locality of the Belfast HSC Trust were affected by the postal strike, resulting in a group of patients waiting more than 6 months for their initial assessment.
- 3 Information provided cannot be broken down by length of time waiting for assessment.

Operations Refusal

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients who have been refused operations, due to (i) age; (ii) obesity; (iii) smoking; and (iv) level of alcohol consumption, for each hospital. (AQW 4193/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not collected on a regional basis. The decision to undertake surgery is determined by clinical factors, which take account of an individual patient's condition and circumstances and consideration of the risks and benefits of particular treatments. In some instances it may be clinically appropriate to defer surgery until appropriate non-surgical measures have been undertaken to improve an individual's general health and their likelihood of a successful outcome following surgery.

Accessibility of Health Information

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his plans to implement the recommendations of the Equality Commission on 'Accessibility of Health Information in Northern Ireland for People with a Learning Disability'.

(AQW 4195/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Officials from my Department met with representatives of the Equality Commission in January 2008 and agreed to examine in detail the recommendations set out in the Report "Accessibility of Health Information in Northern Ireland for People with a Learning Disability". Departmental officials, Service Commissioners and Service Providers are currently examining the recommendations,

assessing their feasibility and bringing together a proposed programme for implementation. A further meeting is planned with representatives from the Equality Commission in April to discuss the proposed programme for implementation and to agree a monitoring process.

Voluntary and Community Sector

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the groups within the voluntary and community sector that have secured funding from his department since the publication of the Budget; and to further detail the services this funding will deliver. (AQW 4196/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: All details of funding that is given to groups within the voluntary and community sector are published on the Government Funders Database. The database lists the total amount of funding provided and provides details about what services the funding will deliver. The 2008/09 budget has just been finalised, therefore, any new funding awarded from this budget will appear on the Funders Database as those awards are made.

The public version of the database can be viewed at www.volcomgrantsni.gov.uk.

Adolescent Psychiatric Unit

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (i) recruitment; and (ii) training, that has taken place in relation to the adolescent psychiatric unit at Forster Green Hospital. (AQW 4198/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The adolescent psychiatric unit is currently based at Knockbracken pending the completion of a new 18 bed facility at Forster Green planned for completion in 2009 / 2010.

As regards recruitment, the Trust has advertised extensively in the local and national press and in relevant professional journals. It has also targeted nursing colleges nationally, sending senior nursing staff to job fairs and to attend colleges and arrange interviews locally. The Trust is also working closely with local nurse education institutions such as Queen's University and the University of Ulster at Jordanstown.

As a result, 10 nurses have been recruited and further interviews are being held next week to fill some of the remaining vacant posts.

In relation to training, the Trust is acutely aware of the importance of staff development and training for those employed in this specialist service. This remains the subject of continuous review. All staff appointed to this service have completed a comprehensive induction programme which focuses on issues including:

- All policies and procedures pertinent to the care and protection of young people;
- Risk Management, Child Protection and the Management of Aggression;
- Clinical care and treatment regimes;
- Professional practice and regulation; and
- Knowledge and Skills Framework.

Training is kept under continuous review and staff are provided with opportunities to attend relevant training courses.

Written Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of written questions he has answered in each month since May 2007. (AQW 4209/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is set out in the table below:

Month	Number of AQs Answered
May 07	24
June 07	133
July 07	36
August 07	11
September 07	58
October 07	111
November 07	148
December 07	152
January 08	92
February 08*	186
Total	951

* Figures at 22 February 2008

Orthodontist Appointments

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people who have been waiting for an appointment with

an Orthodontist for over (i) six months; (ii) one year; and (iii) two years. (AQW 4217/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Waiting times for a first outpatient appointment in the orthodontics specialty, by monthly time band, for the position at 30th September 2007, the quarter for which official information is most recently available, are outlined in the table below.

Number of patients in Northern Ireland waiting for a first outpatient appointment in the orthodontics specialty at 30th September 2007.

NUMBER OF PATIENTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND WAITING FOR A FIRST OUTPATIENT APPOINTMENT IN THE ORTHODONTICS SPECIALTY AT 30TH SEPTEMBER 2007

Waiting time in months	0-2	3-5	More than 6 months	Total
Number of patients waiting	402	100	0	502

Source: Departmental Return CH3

There were no patients waiting for inpatient admission in the orthodontics specialty at 30th September 2007.

Orthodontist Appointments

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people currently waiting for a consultation with an Orthodontist. (AQW 4218/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Waiting times for a first outpatient appointment in the orthodontics specialty, by monthly time band, for the position at 30th September 2007, the quarter for which official information is most recently available, are outlined in the table below.

NUMBER OF PATIENTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND WAITING FOR A FIRST OUTPATIENT APPOINTMENT IN THE ORTHODONTICS SPECIALTY AT 30TH SEPTEMBER 2007

Waiting time in months	0-2	3-5	More than 6 months	Total
Number of patients waiting	402	100	0	502

Source: Departmental Return CH3

There were no patients waiting for inpatient admission in the orthodontics specialty at 30th September 2007.

Orthodontist Appointments

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children under 16 years of age currently waiting for an appointment with an Orthodontist. (AQW 4219/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of children under 16 years of age currently waiting for an appointment with an Orthodontist is not available centrally.

Victims of Vioxx

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps he is taking to (i) secure justice for victims of Vioxx; and (ii) compensate the Health Service for both the additional cost of treating those with ill-effects from Vioxx and the purchases of Vioxx. (AQW 4238/08)

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 compensate only US patients affected by the drug.

I will monitor the situation in respect of UK citizens obtaining compensation from the manufacturer; however, it would not be appropriate for me or my Department to comment on a case which may move into litigation.

I have no plans to compensate the Health Service for the additional costs of treating those with ill-effects from Vioxx, nor for the costs incurred in purchasing Vioxx.

Maternity Services

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an assurance that maternity services will continue at the Causeway hospital. (AQW 4240/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can assure you that we plan to maintain the provision of consultant-led maternity services at the Causeway Hospital.

Chlamydia Infections

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the incidence of Chlamydia infection for the years 1990, 1995, 2000 and 2005; (ii) whether or not his department has an active educational programme concerning Chlamydia

infection; and if so, (iii) what other departments support this programme. (AQW 4244/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of diagnoses of Chlamydia infection made in Northern Ireland GUM clinics is given in the table below. The earliest year for which information on Chlamydia infection is available is for 1991.

KC60 Code	Condition	1991	1995	2000	2005
C4A, C4C	Uncomplicated Chlamydial infection	512	473	963	1631
C4B	Complicated Chlamydial infection (including PID and epididymitis)	21	42	40	82
	Total Infections	533	515	1003	1713

Source: CDSC NI.

Figures are derived from the statutory KC60 returns made by the Northern Ireland GUM clinics.

Figures relate to diagnostic episodes and not to individual people. Thus, an individual person may have contributed to more than one episode in any given time period.

The Health Promotion Agency (HPA) has produced leaflets and posters about sexually transmitted infections including Chlamydia. Radio advertisements addressing these issues were broadcast during Valentine's week in 2007 and 2008. My Department has also recently commissioned the HPA to develop a public information campaign to promote positive sexual health.

A Sexual Health Promotion Strategy and Action Plan is in its final stage of development. A multi-agency Sexual Health Promotion Network will oversee its implementation and will include the Department of Education and other relevant organisations.

HIV Infections

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what information he has regarding the causes of increases in HIV infections in Northern Ireland over the last 15 years. (AQW 4245/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am aware there has been an increase in the numbers of new infections of HIV in Northern Ireland over the last two decades. In 2006 there were 57 new diagnosed cases compared to 12 new diagnosed cases in 1992.

Analysis of trends of the probable route of exposure is complicated by the small number of cases in each category and the potential for year to year variation.

Sex between men and sex between men and women remain the most significant categories of probable route of infection, accounting for 91% of new diagnoses to date. Heterosexual transmission has assumed increasing importance since 2002 and now accounts for 41% of new diagnoses made to date.

There is still, however, a relatively low prevalence of HIV in Northern Ireland in comparison to the rest of the UK and internationally.

It is essential to focus on the prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases in the context of an overall approach to good sexual health. A draft Sexual Health Promotion Strategy and Action Plan is in its final stage of development. The Strategy aims to improve, protect and promote the sexual health and wellbeing of the population in Northern Ireland.

HIV Infections

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether or not he will liaise with other departments in developing an updated education programme to alert the public of the potential threat from HIV, given the increase, in percentage of the United Kingdom total, of the prevalence of new HIV diagnoses since the early 1990's. (AQW 4246/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A Sexual Health Promotion Strategy and Action Plan is in its final stage of development. A multi-agency Sexual Health Promotion Network will oversee its implementation and will include representation from the Department of Education and other relevant organisations. In line with the Strategy, my Department has recently commissioned the Health Promotion Agency to develop a public information campaign to promote positive sexual health and this will include raising awareness of HIV. My Department also funds a number of voluntary organisations working in the field of HIV prevention through information, education and awareness raising.

Black Triangle Drugs

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the 'black triangle' drugs currently available on prescription. (AQW 4250/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Each month the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) produces a Black Triangle List which shows those

drugs currently available on the UK market which are subject to intensive surveillance. The current list can be found on the MHRA website at http://www.mhra.gov.uk/home/idcplg?IdcService=SS_GET_PAGE&nodeId=278

Black Triangle Drugs

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of 'black triangle' drugs withdrawn in each of the last five years. (AQW 4251/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The following table, provided by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) which produces and maintains the 'black triangle' list for the UK, details the number of 'black triangle' drugs that have been withdrawn in each of the last five years:

Year	Number
2003	0
2004	0
2005	1
2006	0
2007	1

Organ Donations

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of organ donations for each of the last five years; and (ii) his assessment of the proportion of all possible donations that this represents. (AQW 4253/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Between 2003 and 2007 the number of deceased organ donors from Northern Ireland annually have totalled, 26, 36, 20, 31 and 33. Live donors across the past five years have totalled 40.

Data indicates that of all potential organ donors approximately 50% currently donate organs. The recognition that the UK has one of the lowest rates of organ donation in Europe led to the formation of the Organ Donation Taskforce in 2006. Their first report, published on 16 January, sets out a number of steps aimed at addressing barriers to donation in order to increase the number of donor organs available. It is hoped that this will result in a 50 per cent increase in organ donation across all regions of the UK within five years.

Maternity Services

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of births; and (ii) the percentage of births in Northern Ireland, that occurred at Craigavon Area Hospital, in each of the last 5 years; and to further detail (a) the number of caesarean sections carried out; and (b) the percentage of births that were caesarean sections, at Craigavon Area Hospital, in each of the last 5 years, and how this percentage compares to other maternity units. (AQW 4255/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of births and percentage of births in Northern Ireland that occurred at Craigavon Area Hospital is provided in the table below.

Year	Number of Births at Craigavon Area Hospital	Percentage of N.I. births occurring at Craigavon
2002-03	2,691	12.3%
2003-04	2,843	13.7%
2004-05	3,111	14.8%
2005-06	3,147	13.9%
2006-07	3,588	14.1%

Source: Child Health System.

The number of caesarean section births at Craigavon Area Hospital and the percentage of births that were delivered by caesarean section are given in the table below for each of the last five years for which information is available.

Year	Number of Caesarean Section Births	Percentage of Births delivered by Caesarean Section
2002-03	832	30.9%
2003-04	914	32.1%
2004-05	982	31.6%
2005-06	1,058	33.6%
2006-07	1,140	31.8%

Source: Child Health System.

Of all births in Craigavon Area Hospital for 2006-07, 31.8% were delivered by caesarean section. This is the second highest rate of caesarean sections in Northern Ireland for 2006-07, with only the Royal Jubilee Maternity Service (34.8%) having a higher percentage of caesarean section births.

Drug Prevalence

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether or not he has plans to meet with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland in order to combat drug use, following the publication of the results from the 2006/2007 Drug Prevalence Survey. (AQW 4277/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Drug misuse was a substantial agenda item at the recent British-Irish Council summit meeting, which was held in Dublin on 14 February 2008. During the summit, the Ministers with lead responsibility for drug misuse in England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Jersey, Guernsey, and the Isle of Man all contributed to an informative and positive debate, highlighting key learning and sharing best practice. The relevant First Ministers from each jurisdiction also played a full part in the discussion.

The British-Irish Council Group that specifically focuses on drug misuse will continue to meet at official level on a regular basis during 2008, and it is anticipated that a further Ministerial level meeting will take place in late 2008.

Information from relevant surveys and research programmes, such as the 2006/2007 Drug Prevalence Survey, has and will continue to inform these discussions.

Trust Insurance Policies

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether or not Trust insurance policies require payment by the Trust of an excess in the event of successful medical negligence claims made against the Trust, and if so, how much in excesses has been paid by Trusts in each of the last five years. (AQW 4287/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As a general rule, Government Accounting advises that Departments do not purchase commercial insurance policies as, except in exceptional circumstances, it is cheaper for Government to cover its own risks. For publicly funded bodies to gain a financial advantage requires private insurance companies to make a loss on the cover they provide, a situation which is unlikely and unsustainable in the long term.

None of the Trusts therefore hold commercial insurance policies to cover medical negligence claims over the last five years. The cost of medical negligence claims is met from the Department's resources.

Trust Insurance Policies

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount paid by each Trust by way of insurance premiums to cover claims for medical negligence in each of the last five years. (AQW 4288/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As a general rule, Government Accounting advises that Departments do not purchase commercial insurance policies as, except in exceptional circumstances, it is cheaper for Government to cover its own risks. For publicly funded bodies to gain a financial advantage requires private insurance companies to make a loss on the cover they provide, a situation which is unlikely and unsustainable in the long term.

None of the Trusts therefore hold commercial insurance policies to cover medical negligence claims over the last five years. The cost of medical negligence claims is met from the Department's resources.

A&E Consultants

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of consultants that have worked in Accident and Emergency departments over the last ten years. (AQW 4291/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the table below.

NUMBER OF CONSULTANTS IN ACCIDENT & EMERGENCY DEPARTMENTS

As at September	Headcount	WTE
1998	13	12.6
1999	18	17.1
2000	18	17.1
2001	19	18.1
2002	22	21.6
2003	26	25.7
2004	28	27.7
2005	30	29.8
2006	34	34.0
2007	33	32.9

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.

Cancelled Appointments

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of appointments that have been cancelled by Daisy Hill Hospital in the last year; and (ii) the reasons for cancellation. (AQW 4305/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust has confirmed that for the calendar year January 2007 to December 2007, a total of 71,524 patients were seen at outpatient clinics in Daisy Hill Hospital. Unfortunately the Trust's computer system which is used to manage outpatient appointments cannot, as it is presently configured, produce an accurate figure for those appointments cancelled by the Trust which have affected patients or the reasons why the appointments are cancelled. However, plans are in hand to ensure that this information will be available in the future for all Trusts in Northern Ireland. It is planned that such figures will be available for the next financial year.

It should be noted that the latest figures indicate that the Southern Trust is on course to achieve the present waiting time targets which aim to ensure that by March 2008 no patient waits longer than 13 weeks for a first outpatient appointment, and 21 weeks for inpatient or daycase treatment.

Ambulance Bus Service

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how Daisy Hill Hospital co-ordinates appointments with the Ambulance Bus service. (AQW 4306/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The ambulance bus service or Patient Care Service (PCS) is the non-emergency tier of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service providing non-emergency patient transport services across Northern Ireland.

The Southern Health and Social Care Trust has advised that transport to first inpatient appointments for those patients whom are entitled to use the PCS is arranged with the ambulance service by the patient's GP.

Transport for subsequent outpatient or review appointments is arranged by the Trust using a computer system at the time the review appointment is made. Trust staff are always guided by GPs when arranging patient transport.

Cancelled Appointments

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the procedures, including timeframes, for hospitals to cancel appointments and to provide new appointments.

(AQW 4307/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Cancellation of clinic sessions at short notice is a waste of valuable resources. My Department has taken a number of steps over the last number of years to address this issue.

Clinical staff are now required to give a minimum of six weeks' notice of planned leave. This measure, together with new booking arrangements which mean that patients' appointments are booked no more than six weeks in advance, should ensure that the number of cancelled appointments is kept to an absolute minimum and, where they occur, are due to unavoidable circumstances. In such cases, hospitals are required to contact the patient by telephone and agree a new appointment date, usually within six weeks.

Geriatric Wards

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the salary of the most recently appointed activity worker to a geriatric/psycho geriatric ward. (AQW 4318/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The most recent appointment of a health care assistant with responsibility for social activities in a geriatric/psycho geriatric ward was in the Southern HSC Trust. The salary for that individual is £17,199.

Psychologist Appointment

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the salary of the most recent psychologist appointed through her department. (AQW 4319/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department does not appoint Health and Social Care staff. The most recent appointment of a Clinical Psychologist in the Health and Social Care was a new entrant to the profession. The appointment was made by the Belfast HSC Trust and the salary is £24,719.

CBT Therapist

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the salary for the most recent appointment of a CBT therapist. (AQW 4323/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The most recent appointment of a Cognitive Behavioural Therapist was in the Belfast HSC Trust and the salary is £35,630.

Children with Autism

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number; and (ii) the cost of assessments carried out for children with possible autism, in the past year. (AQW 4324/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Professionals working in both the health and education sectors have a role in assessing children with possible autistic spectrum disorders. This includes Educational Psychologists, Clinical Psychologists and Speech and Language Therapists. Due to the number of different settings in which assessments can take place and the range of professionals involved, it is not possible to detail the number of children assessed for autism in the past year or the costs of such assessments.

Magnetic Resonance Imaging Scanner

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of the Magnetic Resonance Imaging Scanner most recently purchased by his department. (AQW 4325/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department does not purchase Magnetic Resonance Imaging Scanners.

MRI Scanners are purchased by Health and Social Care Trusts; the most recent such procurement was by the former Mater Infirmorum Hospital Trust in March 2007 at a cost of £608,000.

Retention and Recruitment Premium

Dr Deeny asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the progress that will be made on payments to all staff before the end of the financial year, in relation to the Agenda for Change, and the Retention and Recruitment Premium. (AQW 4340/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Over 78% of HSC staff are now on

Agenda for Change rates of pay. Maintenance Craft Workers who qualify for the National Recruitment and Retention Premium will receive this when they move to the new rates.

Hip Replacements

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of hip replacements that have been carried out in the last year; and (ii) the cost of these procedures. (AQW 4355/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There were 2076 hip replacements carried out in Health Service Hospitals in Northern Ireland in the year 2006/07.

(Estimated total expenditure on hip replacements in an inpatient or daycase setting in Northern Ireland for the financial year 2006/07 was £10.9m.

Minor Injuries Unit

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) to confirm that there will be no reduction or withdrawal of services at the Minor Injuries Unit at Ards Community Hospital in the immediate future; and (ii) to make a statement on his long term plans for the Unit. (AQW 4357/08)

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.

Breastfeeding Bill

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he intends to introduce a Breastfeeding Bill, similar to legislation in force in Scotland, to protect the rights of mothers to breastfeed their children in public places or licensed premises.

(AQW 4358/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are no plans at present to introduce legislation similar to the Breastfeeding Act in Scotland. The Breastfeeding Strategy published in 1999 is currently being reviewed. Developments in breastfeeding promotion and practice, including legislative changes in other parts of the UK, will be considered as part of the review to inform recommendations on the way forward.

Alzheimer's Disease

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease within the Strabane District Council area, broken down by age and gender, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 4362/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Unauthorised Leave

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of staff who have taken unauthorised periods of leave, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust, in the last two calendar years.

(AQW 4363/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not held centrally. In order to extract this information from personnel and payroll records Health and Social Care employers would have to undertake a special manual exercise which could only be done at a disproportionate cost.

Alzheimer's Patients

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of funding provided to address the needs of Alzheimer's patients in the Strabane District Council area.

(AQW 4367/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department does not record planned funding specifically for Alzheimer's patients. However the treatment of Alzheimer's falls within Elderly care. In 2007/08 an estimated amount of £12m is planned to be spent on residents of the Strabane Local Government District area under this programme of care.

Alzheimer's Disease

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients currently being treated for Alzheimer's Disease within the Strabane District Council area.

(AQW 4368/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Midwife-Led Maternity Unit

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of births in the last 12 months; and (ii) the number of births that can be accommodated annually, at the Down Midwife-led Maternity Unit.

(AQW 4397/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of births in the last 12 months at the Down Midwife-led Maternity Unit, the Craigavon Maternity Unit, the Ulster Maternity Unit, the Mater Maternity Unit and the Royal Victoria Maternity Unit are given in the table below.

Hospital	Number of Births in 2007
Down Maternity Unit*	0
Craigavon	3,708
Ulster	2,950
Mater	1,174
Royal Victoria	5,482

* Downe Maternity Unit closed from 2003/2004

Information on the number of births that can be accommodated annually at each of these Units is not available centrally.

Health Centre in Newcastle

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 Newcastle, Co Down.

(AQW 4405/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: A Health and Care Centre for Newcastle is being considered within my Department's Primary & Community Care Infrastructure (PCCI) programme, which is a reform and modernisation programme to provide for a range of community based projects over the next 10 years. These will include primary care facilities such as 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 the 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. 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.

The Trust expects to be in a position to confirm its assessed priorities to my Department for consideration, in the spring of 2008.

Occupational Therapist Service

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the reasons for the withdrawal of an occupational therapist service from Arvalee School, Omagh; and to confirm whether or not he will reverse this decision. (AQW 4416/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The responsibility for operational matters in the provision of service rests with the Health and Social Care Trusts. The Western Health and Social Care Trust (WH SCT) has advised me that the Occupational Therapy service at the Arvalee School, Omagh, has not been suspended. It continues to provide a service within the school to children requiring urgent intervention and those in greatest need of therapy.

The Occupational Therapists in WH SCT are currently undergoing a review of their services, embarking on a programme to ensure that the needs of all children at special schools continue to be met and that other children who are waiting for routine assessments are seen in a timely fashion.

Suntanning Parlours

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the research his department is undertaking into links between increased levels of skin cancer and the use of sun tanning parlours. (AQW 4434/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has not commissioned research in this area. However, the Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment (COMARE) has been asked to provide advice to Government on the health effects of sunbed use. 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. The Committee's report 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.

Suicide Awareness

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the strategies his department has in place to raise awareness of the issue of suicide among young people; and to detail (i) the suicide awareness programmes supported by his department; and (ii) the amount of funding allocated to each programme. (AQW 4460/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Suicide Prevention Strategy 'Protect Life - a shared vision' was published in October 2006, following an extensive public consultation process which included key children's organisations.

The Strategy contains 62 actions, of which a number are specifically aimed to target assistance for young people and in particular young males.

In 2007/08 my Department allocated £3.06m recurrent funding for suicide prevention. £1.8m was allocated 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 included targeted outreach programmes for young males and the provision of counselling/mentoring support for young people.

A further £350k was allocated to the Health Promotion Agency to develop a public Information

campaign. Two advertisements were developed and aired in March 2007. One of those “the box” was specifically targeted at young people and is currently being re-run again.

The remaining funding was allocated to cover the costs of research and development, training, All-Island Co-operation and two pilot schemes.

Fire Station at Cushendall

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his proposals for the fire station at Cushendall, including whether he plans to refurbish the existing station or provide a new building. (AQW 4464/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can confirm that the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service plans to build a new station at Cushendall.

Ambulance Care Assistants

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to include the work carried out by ambulance care assistants on Bank Holidays in calculating unsocial hours allowance. (AQW 4482/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Agenda for Change agreement sets out the arrangements for pay enhancements for Ambulance staff who in the normal course of their employment are required to work in the evenings, at weekends and on public holidays. This pay enhancement is determined by the number of unsocial hours actually worked within the normal working pattern over a 13 week period. Ambulance Care Assistants are in some instances required to work at unsocial times but quite often the pattern of work may be subject to change. This fluid situation presents a difficulty when calculating the hours to be worked at unsocial times over the 13 week period. The Northern Ireland Ambulance Trust is currently working with local staff representatives to reach agreement on a method of calculating payments for these staff. Once agreement is reached any arrears due will be paid to the staff concerned.

Agenda for Change

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the mechanisms in place to provide consistency in the allocation of pay bands under Agenda for Change, in each of the Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 4503/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: All procedures for ensuring consistency in pay bands assigned to staff under the Agenda for Change arrangements have been agreed in partnership with staff representatives. Health and Social Care employers and staff representatives must ensure that the grading assigned to the job is consistent across all similar type roles within their organisation. In addition to this local consistency check a process comparing the grading in other organisations is also carried out. Where a grading is found to be similar in two other organisations it is considered to be consistent across the region.

Agenda for Change

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) to detail the number of staff who have appealed their new pay band under Agenda for Change, and have received the decision of their appeal; and (ii) to provide a timescale within which the remaining staff will receive the outcome of their appeal, for each Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4504/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department does not hold the information in the format requested. Officials have asked each Health and Social Care Trust to provide these details and I will write to the member when this information is available.

Roe Unit

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give an assurance that the current provision of 15 continuing care beds at the Roe Unit, located at the North West Independent Clinic, and funded by the Western Health and Social Care Trust, will be maintained at this level. (AQW 4560/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Western Trust, in common with all Trusts, is responsible for providing services for its local population.

The Trust has recently reviewed its contract with the North West Independent Clinic and I understand the Trust will to continue to fund 12 continuing care beds and 3 nursing home beds for the provision of care for older people. This level of service provision will continue to be reviewed in light of the needs of the population, available resources and competing priorities.

Sion Mills Branch Surgery

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm if the Western Health and Social Services Board has plans to use the former Sion Mills branch surgery premises for other health and social care purposes. (AQW 4586/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This information is not currently available. Whilst providing general information and advice the Agency also undertakes targeted exercises to increase benefit uptake among vulnerable groups. The 2007/2008 Benefit Uptake Programme does include a specific exercise in which over 5000 individuals, comprising of families where there is a child with a disability and families with three or more children, are offered a comprehensive benefit check. This exercise is the first in which the Agency has specifically targeted families with children. As this Programme is on-going it is not possible to provide final costs for this exercise at this time.

In addition all Agency front line staff contribute to benefit uptake by providing information and advice on social security matters. Due to systems limitations and the volume of enquiries received by the Agency each year the costs associated with providing information and advice to particular groups are not available.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Waste Produced

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the percentage of waste produced by the department that is recycled. (AQW 3793/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): A recent waste audit for the Department's headquarters building, Clarence Court, which is shared with another Department, confirmed that the percentage of waste recycled had increased from 15% in 2004 to 75%. Similar recycling arrangements exist in other buildings, many of which are also shared, but no figures are maintained by the Department of the overall percentage of waste recycled.

In addition, a recent study undertaken in partnership with the Quarry Products Association (NI), has indicated that a maximum of 10% by volume of secondary and recycled materials is normally included as part of the road construction layers.

Roads Service is also currently working with Waste and Resources Action Partnership in a pilot scheme to determine the total value of recycled products used within road schemes.

Under works contracts awarded by Roads Service, the contractor is responsible for disposal of all waste associated with the contract to appropriate licensed waste disposal or recycling sites. Roads Service is not able to accurately track the quantity of waste material that is actually recycled in the licensed facility.

Derryboye Road

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans to grit the Derryboye Road, Killinchy. (AQW 4077/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Derryboye Road is a C-class road which runs between the B7 Killyleagh Road, Crossgar and the A22 Comber to Killyleagh Road, both of which are included on the winter salting schedule. Whilst the Derryboye Road has not previously met the criteria for inclusion on the schedule, I have asked my Department's Roads Service to arrange for an assessment (including a traffic survey) to be carried out to ascertain whether this route now meets the criteria and can be added to the schedule for routine salting.

This will be undertaken at the earliest opportunity and I have asked that officials contact you when the results of the assessment are known.

NCP Traffic Attendants

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the towns and villages in which NCP traffic attendants are authorised to operate. (AQW 4106/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Traffic Attendants, employed by NCP Services Ltd., are authorised to operate in all towns and villages where parking and waiting restrictions are in place. Deployment of Traffic Attendants is agreed between my Department's Roads Service and NCP Services Ltd. on the basis of need.

Deterioration of the Tubber Road

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to address the deterioration of the Tubber Road, Kircubbin. (AQW 4144/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the Tubber Road, Kircubbin, is a rural unclassified road and that its general overall condition is acceptable. While there have been some damages to verges by

overriding vehicles, repairs have recently been carried out. The carriageway is free of any major defects.

I understand that following periods of very heavy rainfall, localised flooding can occur adjacent to No. 26 Tubber Road. Although this does not severely restrict the carriageway width, I have asked that my officials investigate the options for a resolution of this matter.

Bottled Water

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount of money his department has spent on bottled water, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4159/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The following table sets out the amounts spent by the Department for Regional Development on bottled water in each of the last 3 years.

Financial Year	Amount Spent on Bottled Water
2004/05	£58,194
2005/06	£65,216
2006/07	£56,342

The amounts include expenditure by Roads Service and also Water Service, which in the period up to 31 March 2007, was an Agency of the Department. The expenditure for 2005/06 and 2006/07 include amounts of £5,685 and £2,436 respectively for bottled water which was procured for use by members of the public in emergency situations.

Road Signs

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost incurred by his department in (i) cleaning; and (ii) replacing, road signs affected by graffiti, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 4172/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have informed me that the costs for cleaning and replacing road signs affected by graffiti, are not recorded separately, as this is a small part of the general sign cleaning operation.

Road Signs

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of people who have been prosecuted for (i) graffiti; and (ii) other damage to, road signs, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 4181/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Officials from my Department's Roads Service have informed me that they have not prosecuted anyone, for graffiti or damage to signs in the past five years.

Light Rail System

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he has given to a light rail network, operating from Belfast to Donaghadee, via Comber and Newtownards, along pre-existing rail corridors as a (i) publicly funded; (ii) privately funded; or (iii) PPP/PFI, project. (AQW 4185/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department commissioned a feasibility study for Rapid Transit for Belfast. The scope of this study included determining the best system in terms of technology (either light rail or bus rapid transit), routes and costs. The study also explored how any system should be funded, including the scope for developer contributions from the private sector.

One of the routes under consideration is EWAY which connects Belfast City Centre to Dundonald along the disused Belfast & County Down railway line. I am currently considering the outcome of the study but there are no plans for considering a rapid transit network beyond this area.

Traffic-Calming Measures

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update of the progress that has been made in providing traffic calming measures at the junction of Primrose Hill and Saintfield Road, Belfast. (AQW 4187/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that agreement has recently been reached with the developer of the Brooke Hall development, on the layout of new traffic lights at the junction of Primrose Hill and Saintfield Road. It is now the responsibility of the developer to implement the scheme, in accordance with their planning approval. The developer has indicated that they intend to commence work in March 2008.

Sewerage Blockages

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the call-out standards set by Northern Ireland Water, to attend and deal with sewerage blockages, (i) between Monday and Friday; (ii) at weekends; and (iii) during public holidays. (AQW 4202/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it aims to attend an incident where a home is flooded from the public sewer within 4 hours of receiving a call and to remove blockages in the public sewer within 24 hours. These service standards apply at all times, including weekends and public holidays, but are unlikely to be met during extreme events such as periods of exceptionally heavy rainfall or when the incident is not the responsibility of NIW.

The service standards for water and sewerage services are contained in NIW's Customer Charter, which is available on its website at www.niwater.com.

Septic Tanks

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the current average waiting time for customers to have their septic tanks emptied, broken down by district council area. (AQW 4204/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the average waiting time for a standard septic tank to be desludged during January and February 2008, was 9 working days. As this information is not recorded by district council area, it is not possible to provide the breakdown sought.

NIW aims to desludge septic tanks within 12 working days and urgent requests, such as overflowing tanks, within 2 days. These standards would not apply in cases where access is difficult or special arrangements are required to facilitate desludging such as the use of tractors.

Written Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of written questions he has answered in each month since May 2007. (AQW 4211/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have answered the following number of written Assembly Questions, broken down by month, during the period 8 May 2007 to 31 January 2008.

Period	Number of Written Assembly Questions answered
8 to 31 May 2007	32
June 2007	90
July 2007	87
August 2007	0
September 2007	54

Period	Number of Written Assembly Questions answered
October 2007	119
November 2007	91
December 2007	77
January 2008	57
Total	607

Tubber Road, Kircubbin

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the steps being taken to upgrade and improve the surface of the Tubber Road, Kircubbin. (AQW 4229/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: As indicated in my reply to the Member's previous question relating to Tubber Road, AQW 4144/08, my Department's Roads Service has advised that the carriageway surface is free of any major defects and the overall condition is acceptable. Consequently, I can advise that there are, at present, no plans to carry out resurfacing on Tubber Road. However, the road will continue to be subject to ongoing cyclic inspection and repairs, carried out in accordance with Road Service's maintenance guidelines.

Light Rail System

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the financial and clerical assistance provided in relation to plans for a light rail system to service the greater Belfast metropolitan area. (AQW 4231/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department commissioned a study to examine the feasibility of Rapid Transit for Belfast. The study was overseen by a Project Steering Group which consisted of representatives from DRD's Regional Planning and Transportation Division, Roads Service, Economics Branch and the Strategic Investment Board.

The study included consideration of light rail and bus based technology. The total cost of the feasibility study is estimated at £402k.

Road Signs

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of replacing road signs affected by vandalism in each of the last five years. (AQW 4235/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised me that the cost of replacing road signs affected by vandalism is not recorded separately.

However, on three occasions in the last five years, there have been spates of sign thefts in Roads Service's Western Division. On each occasion the cost has averaged around £3,000 and was reported to the PSNI.

Joint Initiative

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to explore the potential for a joint initiative with Donegal County Council to install lighting and a footway on the road between Claudy village, Strabane to St Columba's Chapel, Donnyloop, Donegal, in order to enhance pedestrian and motorist safety. (AQW 4263/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that a footway currently extends from Clady village in County Tyrone for approximately 600 metres to the border with County Donegal. The first 200 metres of this footway, from Clady village to the 30 mph speed limit, has street lights. The remaining length to the border does not have street lights, as it could not be justified, due to lack of development along that stretch of road.

The responsibility to continue the footway from County Tyrone for a further 600 metres to the small settlement at St Columba's Church at Dunnaloob rests with Donegal County Council. Should Donegal County Council wish to promote this scheme, Roads Service would be pleased to assist with any traffic management required within its responsibility.

Flooding Problems

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to the answer to AQW 3298/08, to detail the timeframe within which gullies are cleaned in relation to those locations which experience ongoing problems with blockages and recurrent flooding. (AQW 4282/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials in my Department's Roads Service have advised that the additional inspection and, if necessary, cleaning of gullies at locations that experience ongoing problems with blockages and recurrent flooding is undertaken as part of Roads Service's routine road maintenance programme. The frequency of these inspections is dependant on the volume of traffic using the road, e.g. rural roads carrying between 500 and 5000 vehicles per day (vpd)

are inspected every 2 months, whereas rural roads carrying less than 500vpd are inspected every 4 months. The response time for remedial action will be dependant on severity of the problem and the potential inconvenience or risk to the public.

Roads Service also responds to reports of flooding problems received from the public. It is not possible to provide an exact timeframe for responding to such incidences, because of variations in the volume of work involved, the complexity of the problems encountered and finite staff resources available.

By way of illustration, during recent flooding that occurred on 4 January 2008, Ards Section Office received approximately 35 telephone calls about flooding incidents, throughout the Borough, in the space of approximately one hour. With limited resources available to tackle such a large number of incidents, staff had to prioritise their responses to enable them to deal firstly with threats to property and potential road safety hazards.

As the flooding incidents subsided, those cases which required further investigation were dealt with, as soon as resources permitted.

Narrow Water Bridge Proposal

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the factors he will take into consideration when determining the viability of the Narrow Water bridge proposal. (AQW 4292/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: With regard to AQW 4292/08, my Department's current plans which align with Budget 2008 and the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (2008-18), do not include proposals for a bridge at Narrow Water. Roads Service is not therefore currently considering the viability of this proposal.

However, I am aware that the southern government has asked Louth County Council to conduct a technical study into the Narrow Water Bridge proposal. Roads Service is also currently undertaking a study to investigate the feasibility, and identify a possible route for a Newry Southern Relief Road, and to explore other options to relieve traffic congestion in the southern part of the city of Newry and help traffic from Warrenpoint access the A1.

I have asked that both Roads Authorities share information on the two studies.

Narrow Water Bridge Proposal

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development what contribution, in both monetary and

percentage terms, it is anticipated that the Executive will have to make towards the Narrow Water bridge proposal. (AQW 4293/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In relation to AQW 4293/08, there are no plans, at present, for the Executive to make a financial contribution to this project.

Frederick Street Link in Newtownards

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the progress towards the commencement of the A22 Frederick Street link in Newtownards. (AQW 4294/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am pleased to advise that the contract to build the Frederick Street link was awarded on 27 February 2008, and that work will commence on site during March 2008. Officials in my Department's Roads Service estimate that the construction will take approximately six months to complete, with the new road opening to the public in autumn 2008.

Park-and-Ride Facilities

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of park-and-ride facilities there are (i) in Northern Ireland; and (ii) in the East Antrim constituency. (AQW 4308/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Park and Ride facilities in the North are provided by my Department's Roads Service and by Translink. The information below pertains to those facilities provided by Roads Service. I have asked officials to obtain the relevant details in relation to those facilities provided by Translink and write to you in due course.

In response to AQW 4308/08, I am advised that Roads Service currently provides 9 permanent Park and Ride facilities in the North. At present there are no Park and Ride facilities provided in the East Antrim constituency.

Park-and-Ride Facilities

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of people that have used park-and-ride facilities, broken down by parliamentary constituency, for each month over the last 5 years. (AQW 4309/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am advised that Roads Service does not maintain details of the number of people using each of the facilities on a monthly basis. They do, however, undertake periodic

surveys on usage based on the number of spaces occupied at a point in time. The table below details the estimated percentage utilisation in each Roads Service Park and Ride facility.

Parliamentary Constituency	Carpark Name	Number of Available Spaces	% Daily Utilisation 2007
Lagan Valley	Sprucefield	320	90
Belfast South	Blacks Road	220	80
Belfast East	Ravenscroft Avenue	109	50
Belfast East	Eastside Phase 2	213	95
Belfast North	Northside (incl York Street 2)	123	100
South Antrim	Toome By-pass at Drumderg Roundabout	90	40
North Antrim	Dunsilly Roundabout	258	33
South Antrim	Paradise Walk Roundabout, Templepatrick	65	95
North Antrim	Ballee near Ballee Roundabout	40	100

Park-and-Ride Facilities

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the plans he has to expand the provision of park-and-ride facilities (i) in Northern Ireland; and (ii) in the East Antrim constituency. (AQW 4310/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am advised that Roads Service is presently considering plans to provide Park and Ride facilities at the following locations:

- Millbrook Roundabout on A8 near Larne.
- Cairnshill, Saintfield Road, Belfast.
- Drumahoe, Derry.
- Dungiven area.
- Tillysburn, Bangor Road, Belfast.
- Millmount, Dundonald.
- Fortwilliam, M2, Belfast.
- Ballyhenery/Sandyknowes, M2.

The Millbrook Roundabout site is in the East Antrim constituency.

Street Lighting

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm that the Roads Service will work in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, to ensure that street lighting is provided at the rear of Wallace Park, Rasharkin.

(AQW 4327/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that Wallace Park, Rasharkin, is a small housing development with street lighting to the frontage of all properties. The unlit laneway running to the rear of the properties, that divides numbers 1 – 12 and 13 – 30, is not adopted by Roads Service and is therefore, the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

Free Bus Passes

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on his plans to provide free bus passes to all those over the age of 60 years.

(AQW 4353/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: An equality impact assessment and policy consultation on the proposal to introduce free travel for those aged 60 to 64 will begin shortly. Subject to a satisfactory outcome of this consultation I expect the necessary preparatory work to be completed by the autumn. This would allow the application process to commence in the summer with the first journeys under the proposed extension being made in October 2008.

Pay-and-Display Car Parks

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total amount of finance raised through pay and display car parks in 2007; and to confirm if this money was used to create additional, affordable car park spaces.

(AQW 4379/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service officials advise that £3.89 million was received through Pay and Display car-parking charges in the period January 2007 – December 2007.

Revenue generated by all car-park charges are used, with income from Penalty Charge Notices, to supplement the overall financing of Roads Service by central government.

National Car Park Scheme

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a breakdown of the amount of money raised by parking fines since the inception of the National Car Park Scheme, including information on surcharges, broken down by each constituency.

(AQW 4383/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Decriminalised Parking Enforcement (DPE) was introduced at the end of October 2006. My Department's Roads Service has advised that in the period to 31 January 2008, £1,010,720 has been received from Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) paid at the full PCN value of £60. A further £3,874,770 has been received from PCNs paid at the 50% discounted value of £30. A further £225,000 has been received following issue of Charge Certificates as a result of non-payment of PCNs. The value of a Charge Certificate is £90. This gives a total of £5,110,490.

I am unable to give you a breakdown of these figures on a constituency basis, as the information is not held in this format.

National Car Park Scheme

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of parking tickets issued, in (i) figures; and (ii) as a percentage, that have been appealed since the inception of the National Car Park Scheme, broken down by parliamentary constituency.

(AQW 4384/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service officials advise that, in the period to 26 February 2008, a total of 205,940 PCNs have been issued.

There are three stages to the appeals process:

1. **Informal Challenge** to Roads Service.

The number of informal challenges received totalled 19,793 (9.6%).

2. **Formal Representation** to Roads Service.

The number of formal representations received totalled 6,283 (3.05%) – a percentage of these will previously have been the subject of an informal challenge.

3. **Formal Appeal** to an independent adjudicator.

The number of appeals to an independent adjudicator received totalled 156 (0.08%) – all of these will previously have been the subject of a formal representation.

I am unable to give you a breakdown of these figures on a constituency basis, as the information is not held in this format.

Traffic-Calming Measures

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his policy in relation to road calming measures for villages. (AQW 4402/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The objective of traffic calming is to improve driver behaviour and control speed, thereby contributing to a reduction in the number, and severity, of casualties resulting from road traffic collisions.

My Department's Roads Service achieves this objective through the provision of a range of engineering measures, which include gateways, central islands, build-outs and road humps. (However, it is not Roads Service policy to provide road humps on through routes).

In line with the Regional Transportation Strategy, it is Roads Service policy to provide gateway features at the entry points to villages and settlements, to highlight to drivers the change in the road environment. In many cases, a speed limit change is associated with a gateway feature. Central islands and additional road markings have also been used effectively, to improve the road environment.

Traffic-Calming Measures

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1968/08, to detail the timescale within which construction will be completed in relation to traffic calming measures in King Street, Newcastle. (AQW 4406/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: As you will be aware, from my previous reply to AQW 1968/08, construction of the King Street Traffic Calming scheme commenced on 13 August 2007, but after some resource problems, the contractor was unable to complete the work.

My Department's Roads Service had received assurances from the contractor at the end of November 2007, that work would recommence and be completed before Christmas 2007. Unfortunately, this did not happen, despite regular liaison with the contractor throughout January and February 2008.

Roads Service officials have now been informed that the work will recommence on Monday 3 March 2008 and be completed by Friday 14 March 2008.

Traffic-Calming Measures

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a timescale for the completion of traffic calming measures in Killyclogher, Co Tyrone. (AQW 4414/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the proposed scheme to provide traffic calming measures at Killyclogher, Omagh, are included in its 2007/08 Local Transport and Safety Measures programme. The contractor is scheduled to commence work on 3 March 2008.

This scheme comprises a number of traffic calming measures, including the provision of speed cushions, 20 mph zones, gateway speed limit signing, traffic islands and two new mini-roundabouts. It will also include alterations to an existing mini-roundabout, to create a double mini roundabout.

It is anticipated that all of the traffic calming measures, apart from the double mini-roundabout, will be completed by the end of March 2008. Land will be required to introduce the double mini-roundabout and the acquisition of it has not yet been completed. It is therefore anticipated that the double mini-roundabout will be provided within the 2008/09 works programme.

Sewerage Systems

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will undertake an urgent review of the sewerage systems in the Dunmurry area, given the problems and complaints in relation to the waste water treatment work at Dunmurry. (AQW 4418/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it has identified the need for capital expenditure of around £12.5 million to upgrade Dunmurry Wastewater Treatment Works and the sewerage network in the area.

Due to competing priorities, work is not scheduled to commence until mid 2010 subject to funding being available following the regulatory periodic review in 2009. The work will take over 2 years to complete.

In the interim, NIW is undertaking work to improve the quality of the discharge from Dunmurry Wastewater Treatment Works and will continue to monitor closely the performance of the Works and take any necessary remedial action to prevent further problems.

Traffic-Calming Measures

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail all the factors that were taken into consideration in taking the decision that traffic calming measures should not be introduced at Circular Road, Castlewellan. (AQW 4507/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The factors that were taken into consideration for the assessment of traffic calming on Circular Road, Castlewellan were the same as those used for all such assessments and are as follows:

- personal injury collision statistics;
- volume and type of traffic;
- traffic speed; and
- environmental factors, such as the presence of schools, playgrounds, shops, public buildings, hospitals, health centres, or care homes.

The scoring attributed to these factors is used to establish a relative priority list for possible schemes in each council area. Unfortunately, Circular Road has not achieved a sufficient priority to merit inclusion on the current programme for Down District.

Official Inquiry

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm that he will bring the initial findings of the official enquiry into the collision at the automated Level Crossing at Old Cullybackey Road, Ballymena, to the Assembly as early as possible, so that any improvements in safety at level crossings can be fully discussed. (AQW 4628/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Northern Ireland Railways is currently carrying out a full investigation of the circumstances and causes of the accident at this level crossing. I will place a copy of the report of this investigation in the Library as soon as it becomes available.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1508/08, to detail the reasons why Northern Ireland Water have not yet completed the necessary work to address water pressure problems in Lyngrove Hill, Glenavy. (AQW 4649/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the work to replace a length of watermain at Glenavy Road, Crumlin has now been completed. Existing services will be transferred to the new watermain by

the end of March 2008 and NIW is confident that this will resolve the water pressure problems experienced by residents in Lyngrove Hill, Glenavy.

A57 Antrim/Dublin Road

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what action his department is taking to reduce the number of accidents on the A57 Antrim/Dublin Road. (AQW 4652/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In my answer to the Member's earlier Question relating to the A57 (AQW 4062/08), I provided details of a proposed road widening and realignment scheme on this route. It is anticipated that these works, when completed, should help in achieving a reduction in the number of accidents that have occurred along this road.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Development of Social Housing

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the most recent development of social housing that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive was responsible for; (ii) the number of houses constructed; and (iii) the cost of the development. (AQW 4131/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The last new build scheme undertaken by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive was a rural cottage replacement scheme at Drumaness, Ballynahinch which went onsite on 30 March 2001.

The scheme was for 4 new build detached bungalows to replace existing rural cottages at dispersed locations in the Drumaness area and cost £383,698.

Translation and Interpretation Services

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the provision she has made in this year's budget to provide translation and interpretation services in relation to application forms to be completed by people from ethnic minorities. (AQW 4165/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In the current financial year my Department has allocated a total of £141,000 for translation and interpretation services in relation to customers whose first language is not English. Within that total it is not possible to

provide the specific amount associated with the completion of application forms.

Staff Demographics

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the percentage of staff in her department that is (i) male; (ii) female; and (iii) disabled, broken down by grade. (AQW 4175/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Within the Department for Social Development including the Social Security Agency and Child Support Agency the percentage of staff that are (i) male; (ii) female; and (iii) disabled, broken down by grade as at 21 February 2008 are detailed below:

Grade	% Male	% Female	% Disabled
Permanent Secretary	0.01	0	0
Under Secretary (G3)	0.04	0.01	0
Assistant Secretary (G5)	0.12	0.04	0.01
Senior Principal (G6)	0.05	0.06	0.01
Principal (G7)	0.73	0.41	0.01
Deputy Principal	1.07	1.28	0.07
Staff Officer	2.11	2.37	0.26
Executive Officer 1	3.55	5.51	0.33
Executive Officer 2	9.66	15.72	0.95
Administrative Officer	17.15	29.64	1.96
Administrative Assistant	3.22	4.68	0.41
Senior Personal Secretary	0	0.06	0
Personal Secretary	0	0.18	0

Grade	% Male	% Female	% Disabled
Typing Manager	0	0.01	0
Typist	0	0.33	0.01
Support Grade Band 1	0.04	0.04	0
Support Grade Band 2	1.15	0.38	0.04
Support Grade Band 2 Cas	0.26	0.02	0.04
Security Guard	0.04	0	0
SW Course Student IT	0.05	0.01	0
Total	39.24	60.76	4.10

It should be noted that the disabled figures provided are those held by the Department for those staff that have indicated they have a disability. However, some staff did not respond when asked whether they had a disability, therefore the figures are only indicative.

Voluntary and Community Sector

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the groups within the voluntary and community sector that have secured funding from her department since the publication of the Budget; and to further detail the services this funding will deliver. (AQW 4197/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Since the publication of the draft budget on 22 January 2008, my Department has made 11 offers of funding to voluntary and community sector organisations at a total value of £400,867.13. This funding covers a wide range of community activity and details are outlined in the table below.

Organisation	Funding Branch	Project Title	Objective	Total Awarded
Galliagh Development Trust	NWDO	Galliagh Development Trust - Core salaries Continuation	The Galliagh development Trust is a new body which will take forward the community plans for a new £5 million pound multi-purpose community facility in Galliagh and to develop the Galliagh masterplan.	£17,876.41
Greater Shankill Partnership	BRO West	Strategic Regeneration Framework	Part of Renewing Communities and Action Plans to set the Strategic context for Neighbourhood Renewal and other key initiatives such as Arterial Routes and Health Action Zones.	£85,972.00
Lenadoon Community Forum	BRO West	Lenadoon Counselling Project Refurbishment	To fit out new premises to provide a more efficient use of available space for confidential Counselling services.	£25,300.00
Shankill Womens Centre	BRO West	SWC Refurbishment GS/NRP2/11/07	To provide a more efficient use of available space for use in confidential Counselling services due to increased caller traffic.	£28,773.84

Organisation	Funding Branch	Project Title	Objective	Total Awarded
Suffolk Community Forum	BRO West	Purchase of Minibus	To provide transport to enable access to training and other activities available in areas outside Suffolk.	£23,425.38
Ulidia Housing Association Ltd	NIHE	Ulidia VPG Payment Jan 08	Grant in respect of discount awarded to tenants who purchased their home	£19,042.00
Windsor Womens Centre	VCU	Windsor Womens Core Funding	To provide funding for a percentage of the core costs of the organisation.	£117,144.47
Braid Amateur Boxing Club	RDO Northern	Running Costs	To engage youth of the community and give them focus	£32,243.46
Dunclug Partnership	RDO Northern	Shared Future	Concert on 12/03/2008	£2,166.88
Shankill Community Projects (Lurgan)	RDO Southern	Play Area	Provision of a covered play area at Mount Zion House, Lurgan	£40,804.26
Drumarg Community Association, Armagh	RDO Southern	Running Costs	Community House Running costs	£8,118.43
				£400,867.13

Written Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of written questions she has answered in each month since May 2007.

(AQW 4210/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The table below details the number of written questions I have answered in the period 8 May 2007 to end of February 2008.

Year	Month	AQWs answered
2007	May	13
2007	June	54
2007	July	59
2007	August	0
2007	September	20
2007	October	78
2007	November	81
2007	December	72
2008	January	45
2008	February	110
	Total	532

Solar Panels

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development to give her assessment of the success of the installation of solar panels, particularly their effectiveness in reducing fuel poverty in homes. (AQW 4233/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Energy efficiency and energy reduction methods remain the preferred methods for reducing household fuel bills and alleviating fuel poverty. Insulation measures in particular provide significant benefit for minimal cost.

Some solar panel installations are being monitored to provide accurate information on their actual performance in terms of output of hot water. Once we have a full year's data, we will be able to carry out an initial cost-benefit calculation.

Renewable Energy Sources

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development, in view of rising oil and gas prices, whether or not she intends to have renewable energy sources included in newly built social homes.

(AQW 4234/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The requirements for the social housing development programme are that new homes should achieve maximum energy efficiency, and minimal environmental impact, heat loss, and running costs.

From 1 April 2008 my Department will introduce a three star level in the Code for Sustainable Homes as the mandatory standard for new Social Housing Development Programme dwellings. 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 - zero carbon home - by 2016.

For a new home to achieve a three star level it will have to be 25% more energy efficient than one built to the 2006 Building Regulations standards. The Code

will require consideration of the use of renewable energy sources such as electricity from photovoltaic panels, hot water from solar water heating panels and combined heat and power boilers. These renewable energy sources have already been installed in many new build Housing Association properties and their use will increase as we work to achieving the zero carbon homes by 2016.

Community and Voluntary Sector

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the groups within the community and voluntary sector that have been informed that funding will cease in March 2008, and what particular services/programmes will be affected. (AQW 4273/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department for Social Development is not responsible for all funding provided for services delivered by the voluntary and community sector. My Department does however provide support for the Sector through a range of funding programmes and I have asked that a list of those groups that have a contract for funding that expires in March this year, and the programme concerned, is placed in the Library as soon as possible.

Severe Disability Allowance

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to clarify why people with Down's Syndrome who qualify for Severe Disability Allowance have to provide medical certificates from their doctor. (AQW 4311/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Severe Disablement Allowance is not available to new

claimants from 6 April 2001. However, existing recipients can continue to receive the benefit for as long as they satisfy the conditions of entitlement for the benefit. A person must continue to meet the threshold of incapacity and evidence of this is normally provided in the form of a statement from the claimant's doctor or by meeting the incapacity threshold under the Personal Capability Assessment.

It is a statutory requirement for the receipt of Severe Disablement Allowance that, unless exempt from the Personal Capability Assessment or until the Personal Capability Assessment is satisfied, a person provides medical evidence to confirm that they are unable to work. However, people receiving Severe Disablement Allowance before 13 April 1995 are subject to different statutory provisions and are treated as being incapable of work without needing to satisfy the Personal Capability Assessment as long as they continue to provide medical certificates. If a claimant is in a specified category, for example receiving the highest rate care component of Disability Living Allowance, he/she may also be exempt from the requirement to provide medical certificates.

Antisocial Behaviour

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of complaints that were received by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in relation to (i) noise; and (ii) anti-social behaviour, in the (a) Ards; (b) Castlereagh; and (c) Down district offices, for each of the past three years. (AQW 4354/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is as follows:

	1 January 2005 – 31 December 2005		1 January 2006 – 31 December 2006		1 January 2007 – 31 December 2007	
Northern Ireland Housing Executive District Office	Noise	All other ASB cases	Noise	All other ASB cases	Noise	All other ASB cases
Newtownards	61	111	32	119	45	162
Castlereagh	21	32	60	71	70	126
Downpatrick	28	63	20	19	37	50

Glenwood Environmental Improvement Scheme

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to outline her department's policy in relation to the provision of funding to projects in areas of high deprivation and social need, in light of the postponement of the Glenwood Environmental Improvement Scheme. (AQW 4403/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Tackling social deprivation is central to the work that my Department is progressing under the Programme for Government. Much of that work is encapsulated in the public service agreements that underpin the Programme for Government. These recognise my Department's significant role in a range of issues that are critical to the fight against poverty. My Department takes the lead in the promotion of decent, energy-efficient, affordable housing; in the regeneration of disadvantaged areas, towns and city centres; and in supporting community development.

As far as the Glenwood scheme is concerned this is a Northern Ireland Housing Executive project which like all programmed schemes is subject to the availability of finance. In this case, given the value and scale of the works, the Housing Executive decided that it would be appropriate to phase the work. The first phase is now programmed to start in October 2008, and the second in April 2009.

Glenwood Environmental Improvement Scheme

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development whether or not she will review her decision to postpone the Glenwood Environmental Improvement Scheme. (AQW 4404/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Tackling social deprivation is central to the work that my Department is progressing under the Programme for Government. Much of that work is encapsulated in the public service agreements that underpin the Programme for Government. These recognise my Department's significant role in a range of issues that are critical to the fight against poverty. My Department takes the lead in the promotion of decent, energy-efficient, affordable housing; in the regeneration of disadvantaged areas, towns and city centres; and in supporting community development.

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first phase is now programmed to start in October 2008, and the second in April 2009.

Lisanelly Army Barracks

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the discussions she has had with the Department of Education, in relation to the future development of the Lisanelly Army Barracks in Omagh. (AQW 4429/08)

The Minister for Social Development: To date, I have had no discussions with the Department of Education in relation to the future of the Lisanelly Army Barracks in Omagh. However, officials from my Department have been working, and are continuing to work, with their colleagues in the Department of Education to explore options relating to the future development of the Lisanelly site.

Housing Shortfall

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the action she is taking to address the social housing shortfall in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. (AQW 4435/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The need for social housing in Fermanagh and South Tyrone will be addressed through the five year social housing development programme. The programme is currently being updated and I have asked the Housing Executive to send a copy to you as soon as it is available. In the meantime I have placed details of the waiting lists for these areas, in the Assembly Library.

Social Security Agency

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the proportion of the Social Security Agency benefit uptake budget that has been targeted at families with children in the spending plans for the next 3 years. (AQW 4487/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Social Security Agency is unable to provide this information as the Agency's budget is not allocated on this basis. All Agency front line staff contribute to benefit uptake by providing information and advice on social security matters; this includes families with children. In addition to providing general information and advice, the Agency also undertakes targeted exercises to increase benefit uptake among vulnerable groups.

The Social Security Agency is in the process of finalising its business plan for the incoming year and

benefit uptake remains one of the Agency's five key priorities.

Energy Performance Certificates

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to provide a timescale within which Energy Performance Certificates will become mandatory, and to make a statement. (AQW 4488/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Legislation to introduce Energy Performance Certificates to Northern Ireland is being taken forward by the Department for Finance and Personnel.

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.

Housing Executive

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the amount of land owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive that is currently being sold for private housing in (i) the East Antrim constituency; and (ii) Northern Ireland. (AQW 4489/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Table 1 below details the land owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in East Antrim that is not required for development and proposed for sale. Table 2 details the remaining surplus land owned by the Housing Executive that is not required for development and proposed for sale.

TABLE 1 – HOUSING EXECUTIVE LAND IN EAST ANTRIM, FOR DISPOSAL

Housing Executive District	Site Area (Ha.)
Carrickfergus	32.95
Larne	14.12
Newtownabbey	12.94
Total East Antrim & Newtownabbey	60.01

TABLE 2 – REMAINING HOUSING EXECUTIVE LAND FOR DISPOSAL

NIHE District	Site Area (Ha.)
Belfast	2.38

NIHE District	Site Area (Ha.)
Bangor	0.71
Newtownards	2.62
Castlereagh	3.27
Lisburn	1.25
Downpatrick	1.19
Banbridge	0.99
Newry	1.39
Armagh	1.63
Lurgan	4.66
Portadown	0.29
Dungannon	0.39
Fermanagh	0.68
Ballymena	0.72
Antrim	20.32
Ballycastle	0.02
Ballymoney	2.22
Coleraine	15.16
Waterside	0.30
Magherafelt	2.03
Strabane	7.3
Omagh	0.86
Cookstown	0.30
	70.68

All surplus sites have been checked against housing need and it is only where no social housing need is identified that sites are advertised for sale.

Housing Executive

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the amount of money raised from the sale of land owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 4490/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The table below details the amount raised from the sale of surplus Northern Ireland Housing Executive land (excluding house sales) in each of the last five financial years.

Year	£*
2002/03	2,770,000
2003/04	3,949,000

Year	£*
2004/05	1,397,000
2005/06	3,218,000
2006/07	55,156,000

* The amount received after deduction of administrative costs.

House Building

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development, further to her statement to the Assembly on 26 February 2008 in relation to (a) the 1500 houses to be built in year one; (b) the 1750 houses to be built in year two; and (c) the 2000 houses to be built in year three, to detail for each of the three years (i) the locations in which her department plans to build these houses; (ii) the number of houses to be built in each location; (iii) the type of houses to be built in each location; and (iv) the timescale in which her department expects these houses to be occupied in each location. (AQW 4511/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This information is available from the 5 year social housing development programme. The programme is currently being updated and I have asked the Housing Executive to send a copy to you as soon as it is available. From a start on site, a typical housing development takes some 12 to 15 months to complete.

Fisherwick Housing Estate

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her spending plans for improvements to Fisherwick Housing Estate Ballymena, and to confirm if the plans include the provision of a children's play facility. (AQW 4571/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The dwellings in Fisherwick Crescent were included in a Northern Ireland Housing Executive Multi Element Improvement scheme in 1998 at a cost of more than £700k (approximately £21k per dwelling). There are no current plans for further improvements.

The provision of play areas is a matter for the local council who have not yet approached the Housing Executive about land within the estate. I understand that the Housing Executive would consider any such proposal if a formal request was made.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to the answer to AQW 4298/08,

to confirm when the department's spending programme in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, over the period 2008-2011, will be finalised. (AQW 4643/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department's spending plans for Neighbourhood Renewal Areas for the period from 2008 – 2011 will be finalised on a rolling financial year basis. Spending commitments for the new Comprehensive Spending Review period will be based on a combination of factors including the prioritisation of competing demands for funding, the rate at which projects in receipt of commitments of funding progress and the potential availability of additional resources that may be secured as part of in-year funding bids. As plans are drawn together there will be an opportunity to make longer term commitments of Neighbourhood Renewal funds to some projects over the three year funding window and scope to bring planned schemes and projects forward as resources permit.

Housing Executive

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of houses owned by (i) the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; and (ii) other Housing Associations, in (a) Crumlin; (b) Randalstown; and (c) Antrim town. (AQW 4653/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is as follows:

NIHE STOCK (AT MARCH 2007)

	NIHE	Housing Association
Antrim Town	2,103	158
Crumlin	106	62
Randalstown	196	53

Neighbourhood Renewal

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans for an announcement regarding neighbourhood renewal as a matter of urgency, in light of possible staff redundancies by the end of March. (AQW 4733/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I am committed to making sure that Neighbourhood Renewal is focused on making a real difference to the lives of people living in our most deprived communities and I have been giving this issue careful consideration. I will be making an announcement shortly.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION**Bottled Water**

Mr S Wilson asked the Assembly Commission to detail the amount of money that the Assembly has spent on bottled water, in each of the last 3 years.
(AQW 4157/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The following table highlights the amount spent on bottled water from January 2005 to December 2007. This is specifically relating to the 19 litre plastic bottles that are dispersed throughout the building in water fountains. The water is purchased from Classic Mineral Water, and is acquired through our Support Services contractor, currently Eurest.

TABLE 1

Month	£'s 2005	£'s 2006	£'s 2007
January	394.00	890.80	1218.97
February	1502.00	662.40	645.20
March	1079.20	1382.00	663.00
April	993.60	913.60	976.40
May	559.60	1119.20	679.60
June	1370.40	1736.00	2740.80
July	1176.40	1136.40	1204.80
August	1982.00	1039.20	1096.40
September	1739.60	953.60	1827.20
October	962.20	1244.94	1844.40
November	519.60	953.60	2364.00
December	1656.00	1058.26	1660.47
Yearly Total	13934.60	13090.00	16921.24

* Please note the total for year to date 2008 is £1262.00. Figure taken from January 2008 account.

In addition to the bottled water highlighted in Table 1, there are other purchases of water throughout the Northern Ireland Assembly. For example, glass bottles of water (sparkling and still) are requested on a daily basis at Committee meetings, on a sale or return arrangement. These usage figures are set out in Table 3. An alternative to bottled water is available for Committees, in the form of tap water provided in large jugs. In addition, bottled water (plastic, 500ml) is also available from the various vending machines situated throughout the building. A sample of the water usage from vending machines is set out in Table 2 below, along with the amount spent. It should be noted that the Assembly receives a guaranteed gross profit return on each bottle of water purchased from the vending

machine as part of the Support Services contract. The recycling of these bottles is carried out on a daily basis. In terms of glass bottles, a collection is made daily from Parliament Buildings by Estate Management as part of a Stormont Estate recycling initiative. With reference to the plastic bottles purchased from the vending machines, these should be disposed in the relevant recycling receptacles that are located in tea points throughout the building. The 19 litre plastic bottles purchased through the Support Services contract are collected on a weekly basis to be returned to the supplier, and re-used or recycled. The Plastic cups that are provided at the water fountains are collected on a daily basis, and are recycled by Estate Management in the same way as the glass bottles.

TABLE 2 – A SAMPLE OF TOTAL WATER SALES FROM VENDING MACHINES (JANUARY 2008, FEBRUARY 2008)

February	Per machine	Selling Price	Total
Still Water 500ml	2, 5, 3, 3	£0.80 inc vat	£10.40
January			
Still Water 500 ml	1, 1, 3, 2	£0.80 inc vat	£5.60
	Bottles 20	Total sales	£16.00

TABLE 3

	Name of Committee	Water Usage (bottles)								Total Usage
		Jun-07	Jul-07	Sep-07	Oct-07	Nov-07	Dec-07	Jan-08	Feb-08	
ETI	Enterprise Trade and Investment	121	68	89	124	97	108	45	106	758
ARD	Agriculture and Rural Development	99	35	86	150	79	70	48	86	653
E&I	Employment and Learning	57	51	58	79	56	46	52	102	501
RD	Regional Development	96	48	53	49	51	63	0	0	360
F&P	Finance and Personnel	69	42	58	98	54	76	32	52	481
S&P	Standards and Privileges	45	17	35	35	34	51	14	40	271
SD	Social Development	78	52	70	87	73	92	64	115	631
ENVIR	Environment	50	35	68	73	64	72	67	68	497
CA&L	Culture, Arts and Leisure	66	41	101	84	59	49	36	63	499
HSS&PS	Health, Social Services and Public Safety	85	40	31	84	0	76	14	85	415
PAC	Public Accounts Committee	110	55	118	66	27	71	44	66	557
EDUC	Education	93	26	48	67	60	85	42	66	487
PROC	Procedures	7	8	0	25	13	20	36	15	124
A&ER	Assembly and Executive Review	0	14	16	139	37	45	47	71	369
OFM/DFM	Office of the First Minister/Dep First Minister	73	55	70	120	49	82	43	82	574
	Totals	1049	587	901	1280	753	1006	584	1017	7177

* Please note that no Committee meetings occurred during the month of August 2007

* Cost per bottle is £0.25p. Total cost for 7177 bottles = £1794.25

Bottled Water

Mr S Wilson asked the Assembly Commission to detail the number of bottles of water that have been provided by the Assembly for use at (i) Committee meetings; and (ii) Assembly functions, in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 4160/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): Please see the information you require in the attached annex.

Annex

- (i) In March 2007, the Northern Ireland Assembly awarded a new Support Services contract to Eurest following a procurement exercise. In previous years, this contract had been held by Mount Charles. As a result, we are unable to provide figures for the period prior to March 2007, as our previous contractor would have held this information. According to Eurest, records highlighting the usage of bottled water in Committee meetings have been held from June 2007, and are set out in the following table.

	Name of Committee	Water Usage (bottles)								Total Usage
		Jun-07	Jul-07	Sep-07	Oct-07	Nov-07	Dec-07	Jan-08	Feb-08	
ETI	Enterprise Trade and Investment	121	68	89	124	97	108	45	106	758
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		Jun-07	Jul-07	Sep-07	Oct-07	Nov-07	Dec-07	Jan-08	Feb-08	
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SD	Social Development	78	52	70	87	73	92	64	115	631
ENVIR	Environment	50	35	68	73	64	72	67	68	497
CA&L	Culture, Arts and Leisure	66	41	101	84	59	49	36	63	499
HSS&PS	Health, Social Services and Public Safety	85	40	31	84	0	76	14	85	415
PAC	Public Accounts Committee	110	55	118	66	27	71	44	66	557
EDUC	Education	93	26	48	67	60	85	42	66	487
PROC	Procedures	7	8	0	25	13	20	36	15	124
A&ER	Assembly and Executive Review	0	14	16	139	37	45	47	71	369
OFM/DFM	Office of the First Minister/Dep First Minister	73	55	70	120	49	82	43	82	574
	Totals	1049	587	901	1280	753	1006	584	1017	7177

* Please note that no Committee meetings occurred during the month of August 2007

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- (ii) Bottles of water are not provided at functions unless they are specifically asked for by the event organizers. If bottled water is provided, this would be charged at the same tariff as an external event/function. Therefore, no records are kept of how many bottles of water are actually consumed at each function.

Environmentally Sustainable

Mr Beggs asked the Assembly Commission to detail the progress that has been made towards making the Northern Ireland Assembly more environmentally sustainable; and in particular, what steps have been taken to reduce (i) heating costs; (ii) overall energy requirements; (iii) water consumption; and (iv) the use of bottled water. (AQW 4284/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): An audit was undertaken by Carbon Trust in 2002, I would refer the Member to AQW 2375/08 which detailed the key recommendations and actions implemented. Moreover a second environmental audit has been carried out by Office of the Keeper and Research Services to look at environmental management within Parliament Buildings. Office of the Keeper is currently in the process of meeting with Carbon Trust to review this audit in light of new initiatives to ensure that the Assembly is as environmentally efficient as possible. Talks are also underway with Carbon Trust to source energy awareness training for staff within Parliament Buildings. The Northern Ireland Assembly takes part in the Public Sector Energy Campaign.

- i) The Assembly Commission is continuing to work on reducing the heating costs for Parliament Buildings. By converting to natural gas as a primary heating source carbon dioxide emissions have been reduced by 458 tonnes. Building

Management Branch is constantly reviewing the heating schedules and liaising with DFP Engineering Services and Energy Unit on energy saving matters.

- ii) The Assembly Commission works closely with the DFP Engineering Services and Energy Unit 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. The Assembly Commission is committed to adopting a proactive approach to energy management and where possible uses renewable sources. Currently 25% of electricity supplied to Parliament Buildings, is from a renewable source.
- iii) Water saving flush systems for urinals have been fitted in the following locations.
- 4th floor east
 - 3rd floor east and west
 - 2 nd floor east and west
 - 1st floor east and west
 - Ground floor 3 sets
 - Basement 2 sets
- Building Management Branch is presently consulting with DFP Engineering Services and

Energy Unit and Carbon Trust for guidance on fitting water saving devices to each toilet within the building. It is hoped that these will be trialed in a few of the toilets to ensure they do not have an adverse effect before installing them in all toilets. The 'Hippo Bags', cistern dams had to be removed in some Public Sector buildings as they did not allow adequate flush of the WC pan.

iv) I would refer the Member to AQW 4285/08.

Bottled Water

Mr Beggs asked the Assembly Commission to detail (i) the cost of bottled water consumed during the previous calendar year; and (ii) what plans it has to use a more environmentally sustainable supply of water. (AQW 4285/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): (i) The following table highlights the amount spent on bottled water from January 2007 to December 2007. This is specifically relating to the 19 litre plastic bottles that are dispersed throughout the building in water fountains. The water is purchased from Classic Mineral Water, and is acquired through our Support Services contractor, currently Eurest.

TABLE 1

Month	£'s 2007
January	1218.97
February	645.20
March	663.00
April	976.40
May	679.60
June	2740.80
July	1204.80
August	1096.40
September	1827.20
October	1844.40
November	2364.00
December	1660.47
Yearly Total	16921.24

Please note the total for year to date 2008 is £1262.00. Figure taken from January 2008 account.

In addition to the bottled water highlighted in Table 1 above, there are other purchases of water throughout the Northern Ireland Assembly. For example, glass bottles of water (sparkling and still) are requested on a daily basis at Committee meetings, on a sale or return arrange-

ment. These usage figures are set out in Table 3, although records by Eurest are only available from June 2007. An alternative to bottled water is available for Committees, in the form of tap water provided in large jugs. In addition, bottled water (plastic, 500ml) is also available from the various vending machines situated throughout the building. A sample of the water usage from vending machines is set out in Table 2, along with the amount spent. It should be noted that the Assembly receives a guaranteed gross profit return on each bottle of water purchased from the vending machine as part of the Support Services contract. The recycling of these bottles is carried out on a daily basis. In terms of glass bottles, a collection is made daily from Parliament Buildings by Estate Management as part of a Stormont Estate recycling initiative. With reference to the plastic bottles purchased from the vending machines, these should be disposed in the relevant recycling receptacles that are located in tea points throughout the building. The 19 litre plastic bottles purchased through the Support Services contract are collected on a weekly basis to be returned to the supplier, and re-used or recycled. The plastic cups that are provided at the water fountains are collected on a daily basis, and are recycled by Estate Management in the same way as the glass bottles.

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* Please note that no Committee meetings occurred during the month of August 2007

* Cost per bottle is £0.25p. Total cost for 7177 bottles = £1794.25

- (ii) Tentative steps were previously taken to source possible alternatives to the current bottled water used, in order to provide a more environmentally sustainable supply of water. At the time, Building Management Branch sourced water cooler units with direct line feeds from the water mains. These water cooler units also came with a waste outlet. However, as a result of information provided by various Northern Ireland Civil Service departments who had installed similar water coolers, it was decided not to pursue this at the time due to a risk of flooding. Since this time, there have been no further attempts to source alternatives; however we are extremely mindful of environmental issues and will continue to be open-minded about sourcing a workable alternative to the current bottled water system in operation within the Assembly. In addition, we have emphasised a commitment to environmental protection to our Support Services contractor, and have encouraged Eurest to adopt a positive approach to environmental policies and practices.

Wireless Internet

Miss McIlveen asked the Assembly Commission if there are any plans to increase the strength of the wireless internet signal to allow wireless laptop computers, issued by the Assembly to Members, to be used to their full potential. (AQW 4369/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The IS Office on behalf of the NI Assembly Commission, began the replacement of the old computer network and the provision of a secure Wireless Local Area Network (WLAN) in September 2007. Phase 1 of the project included the provision of an interim wireless network in Parliament Buildings in September 2007. The final phase of the work, currently underway includes a review of wireless coverage to eliminate any weak signal areas identified by users of the interim solution.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 14 March 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Maze Site

Mr McNarry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give a timescale within which it will finalise plans for the development of the Maze site; and to provide a progress update on outcomes achieved to date. (AQW 2829/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): 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, has not yet been concluded. Officials in DFP are currently examining both the value for money business case and the potential affordability.

Demolition works are currently underway across much of the site and should be completed within the next few months. Remediation works to remove lead contamination and fuel oil spillage are about to start. Preliminary design work has been done preparatory to any decision that may be made to develop the site in accordance with the outcome of the bidding process.

Policing and Justice Powers

Mr McClarty asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail any discussions it has had with the Northern Ireland Office, on the proposed transfer of Policing and Justice powers. (AQW 3005/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The devolution of policing and justice is currently a matter for consideration by the Assembly, which is

required to report to the Secretary of State by 27 March 2008. Officials from OFMDFM and other relevant Departments are considering with NIO the full range of implications of the devolution of policing and justice to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Pension Provision

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the representations it has made in relation to the pension provision for former members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary Part Time Reserve, arising out of the debate in the Assembly on 26 June 2007.

(AQW 3170/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We refer the Member to our previous response to Mr David McNarry – Written answers to questions, Friday 18 January, Page WA231, AQW 2358/08.

Representation has been made to the NIO. We continue to await a response.

Sustainable Development

Mr McKay asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm whether or not the responsibility for sustainable development will be given to an individual Minister. (AQW 3491/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Responsibility for cross-government strategic oversight of sustainable development was transferred from the DOE to OFMDFM following the publication of the Sustainable Development Strategy in May 2006. This was intended to move sustainable development closer to the ‘heart of government’.

OFMDFM has, since then, led work across Departments on implementation of the Strategy. There are currently no plans to change these arrangements.

Poverty Action Plan

Ms Anderson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to produce an action plan to deliver on the commitment ‘to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need’; and to outline how it intends to develop and consult on this matter. (AQW 3594/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Following consultation with the OFMDFM Committee, the Executive will shortly consider proposals on the adoption of a strategy to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need and the underlying principles outlined in the current

strategy 'Lifetime Opportunities'. In adopting its strategy, the Executive will also consider those actions needed to deliver agreed targets and goals and how best to measure progress. These considerations will include an assessment of proposed associated objectives, goals and targets as well as those actions.

Child Poverty

Mrs McGill asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the current targets for the eradication of child poverty. (AQO 2236/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Northern Ireland Executive is fully committed to tackling child poverty here.

This commitment is clearly outlined in our Programme for Government document (PSA 7) which includes commitments to:

- reduce by 50% the number of children living in poverty; and
- work towards the elimination of severe child poverty by 2012.

We fully recognise the challenging nature of these commitments, and meeting these will be difficult and will require co-ordinated action across all Departments.

There is an onus on this administration, therefore, to build on the benefits that have already accrued from UK-wide policies such as tax credits, etc. This can be achieved by way of all Government Departments targeting resources at areas where most impact can be achieved.

The Executive Committee will shortly consider proposals in respect of its statutory obligation to adopt a strategy which sets out how it proposes to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation here based on objective need.

That consideration will include the assessment of existing targets and the need to develop new short/medium term targets which could contribute to our major child poverty commitments.

Victims' and Survivors' Commission

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide a timescale within which legislation for the Victims' and Survivors' Commission will be introduced. (AQW 4330/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Drafting of legislation to provide for the Victims and Survivors Commission is at an advanced stage and we hope to introduce a Bill in the very near future.

Planning Appeals Commission

Miss McIlveen asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what assessment it has made of the reasons for the increase in the number of appeals lodged with the Planning Appeals Commission, in relation to the Ards Borough Council area, from April 2006. (AQW 4449/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Planning Appeals Commission is a tribunal Non-Departmental Public Body. Given its independent tribunal status it is appropriate for its Chief Commissioner to provide a response directly to you, and we understand she has written to you in the following terms:

"The increase in the number of appeals lodged with the Planning Appeals Commission in relation to the Ards Borough Council area, is a result of the high volume of planning applications submitted to Planning Service in early 2006."

OFMDFM is aware of the general build-up of appeals in the Planning Appeals Commission and is fully committed to providing it with the resources required to address the backlog. The additional funding allocations for PAC in the Budget 2008-2011 will provide the Chief Commissioner with the funding certainty to enable her to recruit additional commissioners. This additional funding has the potential to fund a significant number of additional commissioners, although the actual number to be appointed will be for the Chief Commissioner to determine, taking account of the Commission's capacity to manage a greatly increased complement and also subject to the availability of suitable people from within a limited and specialised market. Arrangements are already under way to deliver a competition for commissioners.

Press Officers

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of press officers that are employed by his department. (AQW 4533/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: There are currently nine Press Officers employed within the department, who provide support to the First Minister, deputy First Minister, Junior Ministers and departmental officials on core press office activity. A number of the press officers also provide media planning support to the other 10 departments. The Director and Deputy Director of the Executive Information Service also provide input as part of their cross departmental responsibility.

Maze Site

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answer to AQW 3072/08, to confirm that any future development of the Maze site will require Executive approval.

(AQW 4562/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

As indicated in response to AQW 3072/08, the development of the Maze / Long Kesh site will not proceed without Executive agreement.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

European Fisheries Fund

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the amount of funding that has been allocated by the European Fisheries Fund; (ii) the timescale in which the funding will be made available; (iii) the recipients of the funding; (iv) the proportion of the funding that will be given to the fishing sector and processing sector; and to confirm whether fishing vessels under 10 metres will be included in the scheme.

(AQW 4378/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): (i) The amount allocated for the NI Fishing industry is €18.1m euro which will be match funded by my Department.

(ii) The EFF operational programme is being prepared by Defra on behalf of the 4 fisheries administrations. It is anticipated that this will be approved by the European Commission in July. The EFF will be open to applications shortly after the operational programme is approved and the scheme will run until 2013.

(iii) Funding will be available for all sectors – sea and inland fisheries, aquaculture businesses, producer organisations, processing and marketing businesses - as well as for fisheries community areas. Some of the initiatives will require EU and national grant to be supplemented by private sector investment.

(iv) My Departments proposals for financial support for the fishing industry will be contained in its European Fisheries Fund Investment Plan which will detail the proposed spending priorities across the different sectors. Funding will be available to fishing vessels under 10 metres. The document will issue for public consultation on at the end of April. This coincides with the launch of similar documents in England, Scotland and Wales.

Forest Service

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her priorities for the Forest Service; and what her assessment is of whether or not increased recreational activity should be encouraged in forests.

(AQW 4408/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My priorities for forestry in Northern Ireland are set out in the Forestry Strategy, published in March 2006. These are:

A programme of afforestation, with the long term goal of doubling the area of forest, from 6% to 12%; and

Sustainable management of our existing woods and forests, taking account of economic, environmental and social use requirements.

The forestry strategy also recognises the need to facilitate recreation in forests. The North's forests offer great opportunity for social use, attracting over two million public visits annually. They are, therefore, a valuable recreation resource. I want to realise the potential of our forests, as far as possible, whilst protecting the natural forest environment. My officials in Forest Service will be producing a recreation strategy during the next business year, to set out a clear policy on recreation and a framework for recreation provision.

Sea-Fishing Training

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the financial assistance for sea fishing training, that has been allocated for (i) 2007-2008; (ii) 2008-2009; and (iii) 2009-2010.

(AQW 4430/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department provided the Sea Fish Industry Training Association (NI) Ltd with the following funds for sea fishing training projects in 2007/08.

- £3.5k for the completion of an Industry Skills Audit for the Fishing Industry
- £17k for Enhanced Safety Training - provision of training courses in (non-statutory) skills in Engine Room Watch-keeping, Fire-fighting and Bridge Watch-Keeping
- £10k for new IT equipment for the provision of training courses at NI ports (mobile facilities)
- £33k for bursaries for fishermen to secure accredited qualifications e.g. skipper, deckhand and engineering qualifications (to cover the cost of classes, examinations, travel and subsistence)

The take up of training opportunities was variable and in some cases disappointing. The following

projects have therefore been carried forward into 2008/09 with the financial provision as indicated.

- £7k for enhanced safety training
- £33k for training bursaries

As yet there have been no further financial allocations for 2008/09 and 2009/10, however a full range of training opportunities for all sectors of the fishing industry will be provided under the European Fisheries Fund which will be open to applications later in the year.

With regard to my plans for “replacing sea fishing training when it ends” I refer to my answer to your question AQW 2562/08 which explained that there is a change of approach to funding such training by the Sea Fish Industry Authority (Seafish). From this you will be aware that funding is not going to end. Furthermore my Department will continue to invest in training for the industry to enhance operational skills and contribute to the further development of a safety culture in the industry.

Agricultural and Land Skills

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update on the progress made in relation to the development of agricultural and land based skills in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4466/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) is responsible for the delivery of education and training programmes to develop the skills and competences of those entering or already working in the agri-food industry. For those entering the agricultural and landbased industries CAFRE provides a suite of Further and Higher education programmes ranging from NVQ level 2 (Craft level) to honours degree. In each of the last three years enrolments onto these programmes are as follows: -

Year	Students
2004/05	1319
2005/06	1336
2006/07	1332

Final enrolment numbers for the 07/08 academic year are not yet available.

CAFRE also provides a comprehensive suite of industry training programmes for those already working in the industry. These programmes cover a number of areas and include practical skills training, technical knowledge development and business management skills development. In each of the last three years the number of participants on these programmes were: -

Year	Students
2004/05	16,800
2005/06	8,315
2006/07	13,160

The Further and Higher education programmes and many of the industry training programmes provide participants with the opportunity to gain a nationally recognised qualification at level 2 or above. During the period 2004/05 – 2006/07 6,700 participants gained qualifications.

Sea-Fishing Training

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the plans she has to replace sea fishing training when it ends.

(AQW 4476/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department provided the Sea Fish Industry Training Association (NI) Ltd with the following funds for sea fishing training projects in 2007/08.

- £3.5k for the completion of an Industry Skills Audit for the Fishing Industry
- £17k for Enhanced Safety Training - provision of training courses in (non-statutory) skills in Engine Room Watch-keeping, Fire-fighting and Bridge Watch-Keeping
- £10k for new IT equipment for the provision of training courses at NI ports (mobile facilities)
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training for the industry to enhance operational skills and contribute to the further development of a safety culture in the industry.

Fishing Regulations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail, in relation to contraventions of fishing regulations (i) her proposals for on-the-spot penalties; (ii) the date on which any such penalties will be introduced; and (iii) the proposed consultation process that will take place.

(AQW 4477/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: (i) DARD along with the Fisheries Administrations in England, Scotland and Wales are currently consulting on a system of Financial Administrative Penalties (FAP) for fisheries offences. Under the proposed system a fisherman may be offered a FAP as an alternative to a criminal prosecution. The fisherman may decline the offer and have his case heard by the courts as at present.

The system has several potential benefits to fishermen including savings in time, cost and anxiety compared to court proceedings, and the avoidance of a criminal record.

(ii) Subject to the outcome of the consultation process it is hoped to introduce an administrative system for dealing with offences under common fisheries policy legislation in early 2009.

(iii) The proposals have been developed with the involvement of fishing industry representatives from each of the regions over the last eighteen months and a formal consultation on these on these proposals was launched on 2nd January 2008. The consultation closes on 25 March 2008.

Press Officers

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of press officers that are employed by her department. (AQW 4534/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There are currently five Press Officers employed within the department, who provide support to the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development and departmental officials on core press office activity.

Omagh Livestock Mart

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) any investment,

including I.T. equipment, made in Omagh livestock mart over the last six months; and (ii) the date and cost of each investment. (AQW 4551/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department has not made any investments in Omagh livestock mart in the last 6 months. The Department replaced 3 PCs and monitors in February 2008 at a cost of £1,344 for use by its own staff in Sheep Movement Recording. This equipment will be withdrawn later this year as DARD staff leave the market.

Wild Animals in Circuses

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her plans to ban the use of wild animals in circuses. (AQW 4574/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department's role in circuses is currently very limited. Part III of the Welfare of Animals Act (NI) 1972 protects all animals from unnecessary cruelty or suffering. There are, however, no specific provisions on the welfare of animals in circuses.

The Department did consult on proposals for new animal welfare legislation in 2006, including on the need for regulation of circuses. I have asked my officials to finalise a paper summarising the responses to this consultation, after which I will decide what new legislation is required.

As many of the circuses that operate here are based in the South, it is important that I take note of the position in that jurisdiction in considering this issue. I have therefore asked that my officials liaise closely with their counterparts in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, who are currently drafting new animal welfare legislation.

Animal Welfare Bill

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail any plans to introduce an Animal Welfare Bill. (AQW 4578/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department consulted on proposals for new animal welfare legislation in late 2006. As the 2006 consultation was carried out under a different administration I will want to take time to consider responses and if appropriate to engage with those who responded.

I have asked my officials to finalise a report which will summarise the outcome of the responses to the consultation, after which I will decide what new legislation is required. The specific provisions of any new legislation will depend on detailed consideration of these consultation responses.

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (DAFF) in the South is currently considering updating its animal welfare legislation. I believe that it is important that we take similar approaches to dealing with animal welfare abuses on the island of Ireland. I have therefore asked that my officials liaise closely with their counterparts in DAFF. I understand that DAFF intend to publish their legislative proposals after Easter and I will wish to consider these in the first instance.

Single Farm Payment Appeals

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of (i) Single Farm Payment Appeals that have been heard to date; and (ii) successful Single Farm Payment Appeals, since the inception of the Single Farm Payment Scheme. (AQW 4623/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: (i) To date the External Panel has heard 293 requests for a review of the Department's decision on Single Farm Payment related issues.

(ii) The Panel agreed with the Department's decision in 221 cases. The Panel did not agree with the Department's decision in 68 cases and in 4 cases it did not make a recommendation.

The Minister accepted 206 Panel recommendations and rejected 25. Of the 25 recommendations rejected, the Minister changed the Department's decision in part, for 8 cases. The remaining 62 cases are either recently heard (not yet processed) or are held pending the outcome of legal proceedings which may impact on the final decision.

Loughry College

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to her answer to AQO 2360/08, to detail the reasons why the communications course has not been included in this year's prospectus for Loughry College. (AQW 4881/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: On an annual basis CAFRE produces two prospectuses; one covering FE programmes and one covering HE programmes. These prospectuses include courses delivered at the three CAFRE Campuses of Enniskillen, Loughry and Greenmount.

The Communications courses are included in the current CAFRE HE prospectus which has just been released. You are aware of the current debate about the future of the Communications courses. No final decision has been made.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Sports Clubs

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of funding granted to sports clubs by Sport NI in each of the last 5 years, broken down by parliamentary constituency.

(AQW 3606/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): I am aware that this Question was due for Answer on 19 February 2008 and I apologise to the Member for the delay.

The table below details the total amount of exchequer and lottery funding granted to sports clubs by Sport Northern Ireland in each of the last 5 financial years, broken down by parliamentary constituency.

EXCHEQUER AND LOTTERY FUNDING TO SPORTS CLUBS BY CONSTITUENCY

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Belfast East	-	-	-	-	-
Belfast North	-	217,997	-	-	800,000
Belfast South	-	161,770	161,770	-	-
Belfast West	-	-	-	-	-
East Antrim	-	17,633	-	-	949,500
East Londonderry	235,000	100,000	-	-	85,000
Fermanagh & S Tyrone	300,331	-	-	-	220,000
Foyle	140,000	-	225,000	-	238,274
Lagan Valley	6,680	470,000	-	139,531	-
Mid Ulster	270,140	-	-	-	-
Newry & Armagh	310,041	64,850	-	-	200,000
North Antrim	165,603	-	-	161,636	-
North Down	81,225	-	-	-	460,000
South Antrim	287,276	-	-	-	240,000
Strangford	70,000	75,000	-	-	-
Upper Bann	-	-	-	-	800,000
West Tyrone	169,593	170,643	-	-	1,695,694
South Down	320,762	180,000	108,183	-	-

Bamford Report

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the action he has taken to address the issues relevant to his department contained in the Bamford Report. (AQW 4346/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: DCAL recognises the significant role the Arts, Culture and Sport play in supporting people of all ages with mental health and learning disabilities subject to budgetary considerations. DCAL continues to maintain and develop policies and programmes consistent with the Bamford Review and Investment for Health Strategies. This commitment is demonstrated in DCAL funding of Creative Learning Centres, Disability Sports NI through Sport NI and Museums and Libraries initiatives.

Beijing Olympics in 2008

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to send ministerial or civil servant delegations to all, or part of, the Beijing Olympics in 2008. (AQW 4432/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Olympic Games taking place in Beijing later this year provide a unique opportunity to promote Northern Ireland at a major international event, and are especially important in advance of the London 2012 Games, when we are seeking to maximise the benefits for the province.

No arrangements are yet in place, but consideration is being given to attending the games and how best Northern Ireland can be represented on this important world stage.

Indigenous Minority Languages

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide an update on the progress made by the British-Irish Council in relation to indigenous minority languages. (AQW 4493/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Officials from my Department have continued to attend meetings of the subgroup on minority and lesser spoken languages. Since the last Ministerial meeting of the language sub-group in October 2006, prior to Northern Ireland's return to devolution, progress has been made in discussing language provision in Adult Education, culminating in a two-day practitioners conference on the matter held in Cardiff in January 2008. Several members of the Adult Education Sector here in Northern Ireland attended and

reported positively on the benefits of the seminar. A conference report has yet to be agreed by the group.

The group have also made progress in relation to sharing guidelines drawn up by the Welsh Language Board in relation to bilingual software.

Work remains ongoing on subgroups to discuss Information and Communication Technology, Planning and Linguistic Considerations and Data research and language use survey considerations. Officials are currently examining areas for further cooperation for discussion at their next meeting in March 2008.

Lough Neagh Fisherman's Association

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the funding his department will allocate to the Lough Neagh Fisherman's Association for eels and elvers, in the 2008-09 financial year. (AQW 4510/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department is in discussion with the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development regarding the European Fisheries Fund 2007 - 2013, which can be used to grant aid the purchase of elvers for conservation purposes. It is hoped that this fund may be used to provide funding for the stocking of elvers to Lough Neagh.

My Department has also allocated £60,000 for 2008/2009 for an Agri-Food and Bio Sciences scientist to continue work at Lough Neagh. His research aims to support a viable and sustainable fishery for Lough Neagh Fisherman's Association members in the context of the EU conservation regulations.

Press Officers

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of press officers that are employed by his department. (AQW 4532/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department currently employs 3 Press Officers.

Maze Site

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm whether the proposed conflict transformation centre at the Maze site will have functions other than that of a museum; and to detail who will administer these functions according to the terms of the proposed business plan. (AQW 4547/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In the UK the commonly accepted definition of a

museum is that adopted by the Museums Association in 1998 which says that, “Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens which they hold in trust for society.”

The International Centre for Conflict Transformation (ICCT) is not the responsibility of my Department.

Conflict Transformation Centre

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail how his department officially defines a museum; and to detail how the proposed conflict transformation centre meets this definition. (AQW 4549/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In the UK the commonly accepted definition of a museum is that adopted by the Museums Association in 1998 which says that, “Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens which they hold in trust for society.”

The International Centre for Conflict Transformation (ICCT) is not the responsibility of my Department.

Ulster-Scots Folk Orchestra

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what consideration he has given to funding of the Ulster-Scots Folk Orchestra. (AQW 4575/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure does not fund organisations directly. Any application for funding should be made to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland or the Ulster-Scots Agency.

Ulster-Scots Folk Orchestra

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give his assessment of the contribution of the Ulster-Scots Folk Orchestra. (AQW 4576/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure does not fund the Ulster-Scots Folk Orchestra directly and, therefore, it is not appropriate for me to assess the contribution of the organisation.

The Orchestra receives funding from the Ulster-Scots Agency, which is of the view that it provides a worthwhile service to the community through its active promotion of Ulster-Scots music, dance and

cultural traditions. In particular, the Ulster-Scots Agency has advised that the Ulster-Scots Folk Orchestra has been of particular benefit to the schools it has been working with.

Ulster-Scots Folk Orchestra

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail, by financial year, the amount of funding awarded to the Ulster-Scots Folk Orchestra. (AQW 4577/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Ulster-Scots Folk Orchestra has received funding from both the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Ulster-Scots Agency. Details of the amounts awarded since 2003 are shown in the table below:

ARTS COUNCIL OF NORTHERN IRELAND

Financial Year	Amount awarded (£)	Programme
2003/04	51,000	3 year Lottery access award

ULSTER-SCOTS AGENCY

Year	Amount awarded (£)	Programme
2003	531	Financial Assistance Scheme
2004	3,500	Financial Assistance Scheme
	1,000	Sponsorship funding
2005	177.90	Financial Assistance Scheme
	1,951	Financial Assistance Scheme
2006	4,228	Financial Assistance Scheme
2007	3,500	Financial Assistance Scheme
	2,500	Financial Assistance Scheme

Stadium Improvements

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the criteria that soccer clubs have to meet in order to obtain funding for stadium improvements. (AQW 4670/08)

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. SNI operates a number of

capital funding programmes available for stadium improvements to which soccer clubs may apply. In order to obtain funding, clubs must demonstrate to SNI that their projects can satisfy the following criteria:

- benefits sport and the inhabitants of Northern Ireland;
- financial need;
- viability;
- additionality; and
- security of tenure

In addition, applications must be for capital projects, from properly constituted organisations with no outstanding issues relating to non-compliance with the conditions associated with any previous SNI award.

Dr Syd Millar

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the consideration he has given to recognising the contribution made to rugby by Dr Syd Millar. (AQW 4810/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I intend to host a reception at Hillsborough Castle to recognise Dr Syd Millar's considerable contribution to rugby.

Road Bowls

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the funding that is available to promote and support the sport of road bowls in Co Armagh. (AQW 4891/08)

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. SNI has not received any applications for funding from the sport of road bowls and has not provided funding to promote and support the sport in Co Armagh.

EDUCATION

Payment of Teachers

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education to detail the consultation that took place, particularly with the teachers' unions, before the decision to end the payment of teachers' added years was taken. (AQW 3489/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): No decision has been taken to end the payment of added years: the decision to credit a teacher with additional service remains discretionary. However, in future those who decide to award added years will be accountable for the decision and for the associated costs, as provided for in the Teachers' (Compensation for Redundancy and Premature Retirement) Regulations (NI) 1991 (as amended).

The Teachers' Superannuation Consultative Committee here is the established forum for consultation on matters relating to the Teachers' Pensions Scheme. Members of the Committee were first made aware in February 2006 that action was required to control the escalating costs of the Premature Retirement Compensation Scheme (PRCS). PRCS was included on the agenda and discussed at subsequent meetings of the Committee held in June 2006, December 2006, June 2007 and November 2007. At the June 2007 meeting, members were encouraged to suggest alternatives to hard charging teachers' employers for the cost of early retirement: none has yet been received.

Tá grúpa oibre á bhunú anois i gcomhair comhairliúcháin le páirtithe ábhartha faoi na socruithe do SCSRA do bhlianta sa todhchaí.

A working group is now being established for consultation with relevant parties on the arrangements for PRCS for future years.

Superannuation Liaison Committee

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the meetings that took place; and (ii) the findings, of the Superannuation Liaison Committee, set up by her department. (AQW 3490/08)

The Minister of Education: The Teachers' Superannuation Consultative Committee here is the established forum for consultation on matters relating to the Teachers' Pensions Scheme. Members of the Committee were first made aware in February 2006 that action was required to control the escalating costs of the Premature Retirement Compensation Scheme (PRCS). PRCS was included on the agenda and discussed at subsequent meetings of the Committee held in June 2006, December 2006, June 2007 and November 2007. At the June 2007 meeting, members were encouraged to suggest alternatives to hard charging: none has yet been received.

Tá grúpa oibre á bhunú anois i gcomhair comhairliúcháin le páirtithe ábhartha faoi na socruithe do SCSRA do bhlianta sa todhchaí.

A working group is now being established for consultation with relevant parties on the arrangements for PRCS for future years.

Premature Retirement Scheme

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons why her department did not set up a working group to consider the implications of 'hard charging' schools for teachers' added years in the Premature Retirement scheme. (AQW 3503/08)

The Minister of Education: Consideration was initially given to the proposal that employers would be hard charged for the full cost of premature retirement from 1 April 2008 (i.e. both the cost of early payment of pension and any enhancement in the form of added years), and my Department gave an undertaking to the Teachers' Council here at a meeting held on 21 August 2006 that a working group would be set up to consult on the introduction of full hard-charging from April 2008. In the event it was not possible in the time available to introduce the legislative changes that would be required to implement full hard charging from April 2008, or to consult with stakeholders. A working group is now being established for consultation with relevant parties on the arrangements for the Premature Retirement Compensation Scheme (PRCS) for future years.

Interim measures were nevertheless necessary to control the escalating cost of teachers' premature retirement; and no legislative change was required to hard charge employing authorities for the cost of enhancement (added years), as this is already provided for in the Teachers' (Compensation for Redundancy and Premature Retirement) Regulations (NI) 1991 (as amended).

Consultation took place through the Teachers' Superannuation Consultative Committee here, which is the established forum for consultation on matters relating to the Teachers' Pensions Scheme. Members of the Committee were first made aware in February 2006 that action was required to control the escalating costs of the PRCS. PRCS was included on the agenda and discussed at subsequent meetings of the Committee held in June 2006, December 2006, June 2007 and November 2007.

Ag cruinniú Mhí Mheithimh 2007, gríosáíodh comhaltaí le roghanna eile a mholadh diomaite de na húdaráis chúiteacha a bheith freagrach as an chostas iarbhir: ní bhfuarthas aon mholadh go dtí seo.

At the June 2007 meeting, members were encouraged to suggest alternatives to hard charging: none has yet been received.

Scottish Executive Meeting

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to provide a detailed account of her meeting with her

counterpart in the Scottish Executive in Edinburgh, on the 12 December 2008. (AQW 3607/08)

The Minister of Education: Tugadh miontuairisc ar mo chruinniú le Fiona Hyslop CPA, an Rúnaí Comh-Aireachta don Oideachas agus don Fhoghlaim ar feadh an tSaoil, don Choiste Oideachais ar 8 Feabhra 2008.

A detailed account of my meeting with Fiona Hyslop MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, was provided to the Education Committee on 8 February 2008. A copy is also now being placed in the Assembly Library.

Post-Primary Education

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons for the absence of any reference to proposals for post-primary education within the Programme for Government and 2008-2011 Budget. (AQW 3668/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá mo mholtaí i gcomhair Aistrithe mar chuid de phacáiste fadréimseach leasaithe don oideachas iar-bhunscoile – a bhfuil príomhghnéithe de sa Chlár Rialtais agus sa Straitéis Infheistíochta: infheistíocht mhór chaipitil i scoileanna agus pleanáil bunaithe sa cheantar le heastát scoileanna oiriúnach don fheidhm, inbhuanaithe a sholáthar; straitéis le scoileanna a fheabhsú; agus leasú curaclaim.

My proposals for Transfer are part of a wide-ranging package of reform for post-primary education – key elements of which are in the Programme for Government and the Investment Strategy: extensive capital investment in schools and area-based planning to deliver a fit for purpose and sustainable schools estate; a strategy for school improvement; and curriculum reform.

Building Projects

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education to report on what consideration is being given to opportunities for area planning and sectoral collaboration within the current 100 plus schools already announced for major building projects within the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland. (AQW 3670/08)

The Minister of Education: I would encourage school authorities to consider opportunities for area planning and collaboration as their building projects are taken through the planning stages so that we make best use of the new facilities in addressing anticipated needs on an area basis.

Mhínigh mé i mo ráiteas den 4 Márta faoi phleanáil bunaithe - ar limistéir gur chóir do ghrúpaí lánacha

agus áitiúla na deiseanna maidir le comhroinnt agus comhoibriú idir na scoileanna a chur san áireamh.

In my statement on 4 March on area-based planning I explained that the work of the central and local area groups should take account of opportunities for sharing and collaboration between schools.

Curricular Requirements

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to address the recent comments made by the Chief Inspector of Schools in relation to the concerns expressed by school principals and staff on the new curricular requirements. (AQW 3855/08)

The Minister of Education: I welcome the Chief Inspector's very helpful report, which shows the progress made during the last school year, and identifies actions to facilitate further progress. Furthermore, I met with the Chief Inspector on 18 February to discuss the issues raised in the report.

The Partnership Management Board (PMB), set up to manage the curriculum implementation, has already made several changes to its support programme in response to feedback from principals and teachers. This has included a refocusing on training for principals and establishment of a principals' forum to improve direct communication with headteachers. Schools also received a specific budget for revised curriculum training, providing heads with additional resources to lead implementation within their schools. PMB has now been asked to make further changes to its implementation programme for 2008-09, to take account of those findings by the Chief Inspector which are not already covered in existing action plans.

In my budget announcement on 12 February, I indicated that, over the next three financial years, an extra £32million will be available for primary schools to support the new Foundation Stage curriculum in Years 1 and 2, and an additional £22million to support the implementation of the revised curriculum and associated assessment arrangements.

Chomh maith leis sin tá an Roinn ag ullmhú straitéis nua cumarsáide le cinntiú go mbíonn a chumarsáid i measc na n-eagraíochtaí oideachais agus scoileanna chomh maith le tuismitheoiri soiléir agus éifeachtach.

The Department is also developing a new communications strategy to make sure that communication across the education bodies and with schools and parents is clear and effective.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what her assessment is of whether or not educational experience and performance at primary school has a bearing on the advice given to the receiving school.

(AQW 3980/08)

The Minister of Education: Measaim gur páirt luachmhar sa chinneadh aistrithe le leas an pháiste aonair pictúir foriomlán de dhul chun cinn oideachasúil agus cumas foghlama an pháiste a forbraíodh thar sheacht mbliana d'oideachas bunscoile.

I consider that a rounded picture of a child's educational progress and aptitude for learning developed over seven years of primary education can play a valuable part in informing the transfer decision in the best interests of the individual child.

It is important that this information is used to maximise the choices available to children and young people.

Interface Funding

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the funding arrangements for schools in interface areas once the interface funding finishes this year.

(AQW 4216/08)

The Minister of Education: I do not plan to make any differentiation in the arrangements for funding schools in the Interface Support Programme when that programme ends on 31 March 2008.

The Interface School Support Programme was always intended to be a short term measure of support for a small number of the schools worst affected by community conflict in particular areas of Belfast in recent years.

The schools in the current programme have been advised well in advance to plan their expenditure for the incoming financial years on the basis that the programme would be coming to an end.

From 1 April 2008, it will again be entirely a matter for the Belfast Education and Library Board to consider and, as appropriate, address within the Local Management of Schools common funding arrangements the relative expenditure needs of these and other controlled and maintained schools in its area.

Leanfaidh an Roinn de bheith ag cothú agus ag cur chun cinn deiseanna níos fearr fostaíochta dár muintir óg ar fad de réir tosaíochtaí na cáinainseise.

The Department for its part will continue to foster and promote better educational opportunities for all our young people in accordance with its budget priorities.

Munia Tober Blackstaff Complex

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the future funding that will be made available for the education project at Munia Tober Blackstaff Complex, West Belfast, given that funding for the project will end this year. (AQW 4261/08)

The Minister of Education: All Departmental funding for alternative education is allocated directly to the Education and Library Boards and it is a matter for each Board to decide how these funds can be best used to meet the needs of young people in its area.

Cuireann Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne Bhéal Feirste oideachas reachtúil comhroghnach ar fáil a dhéanann cuimsiú sóisialta ar gach dalta agus a bhfuil Comhaontuithe ar Leibhéal Sóisialta i bhfeidhm acu le trí sholáthraí atá lonnaithe sa phobal. Is eol dom nach bhfuil aon phlean ag an Bhord le maoiniú a chur ar fail do Thionscnamh Oideachais Ailtéarnach An Munia Tober.

The Belfast Education and Library Board provides statutory alternative education which is socially inclusive of all pupils and also has Service Level Agreements in place with three community-based providers. I understand that the Board has no plans to provide funding to An Munia Tober's Alternative Education Project.

Educational Technology

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to outline the reasons why the Southern and Western Education and Library Boards turned down the opportunity of taking part in a pilot project with the Royal National Institute of Blind People Northern Ireland, which would have resulted in educational technology, of an average value of £2,000 per pupil, being made available to around ten blind or partially sighted children in their area. (AQW 4335/08)

The Minister of Education: I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) and Western Education and Library Board (WELB) that in recent months officers from SELB and WELB with responsibility for service delivery in relation to Sensory Impairment were in dialogue with the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB). On the basis of these discussions the RNIB forwarded a general project proposal for consideration but when the content of this proposal was read in detail by Board officers it transpired that it did not concur with the discussions and potential agreements which had reportedly taken place at previous meetings with RNIB.

As a result the Head of Children & Young People's Services across SELB and WELB wrote to RNIB regarding this matter in January 2008 and expressed

concern about the content of the proposal and the timeline. A meeting to discuss the matter in detail was provisionally arranged for 8 February 2008 but unfortunately the RNIB representative contacted the Board and indicated that this meeting would be cancelled.

Maidir leis an gceist seo, is é barúil Phríomhfheidhmeannaigh Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Dheiscirt agus Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair nach bhfuil an cheist a cuireadh i gcomhréir leis na himeachtaí a tharla le míonna anuas.

In this regard, it is the opinion of the Chief Executives of SELB and WELB that the question which has been posed is not in accord with the events of recent months.

Textbook Provision

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education to detail the engagement she has had with expert stakeholders, in the formulation of a textbook service for blind and partially sighted school children. (AQW 4344/08)

The Minister of Education: I met with the Director of the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) in August 2007 to discuss a range of issues concerning the recommendations contained in the RNIB "Where's my Book" Report.

In response to the campaign, which highlighted a textbook deficit for visually impaired pupils based on research carried out in England, Wales and the North of Ireland, the Department of Education (DE) established a scoping project to gauge the extent of the problem here in the North. The steering group for the project was chaired by the Special Education Officer of the North Eastern Education and Library Board, as a representative of the Education and Library Boards Regional Strategy Group for Special Educational Needs (RSG), and membership of the steering group comprised of principal educational psychologist, who is also a member of RSG, the Principal of Jordanstown Schools, a member of the Education and Training Inspectorate with responsibility for special education and technology and a representative from RNIB.

The Steering Group commissioned an ex-member of the Education and Training Inspectorate, who has expertise and background in visual impairments, to lead the work of the scoping study and he was supported by a specialist teacher seconded from Jordanstown Schools for children with auditory or visual impairments. The Report was presented to the DE in April 2007. An RNIB representative was present at the final Steering Group meeting in April and signed off the report.

The Department of Education, through the RSG, wishes to progress matters to the benefit of all visually impaired pupils and RSG is actively pursuing the views of all stakeholders. This includes consultation

with relevant stakeholders, including the voluntary sector, such as RNIB, the statutory sector, parents as well as children and young people.

Mar chuid den chomhairliúchán seo tugadh cuireadh do Stiúrthóir RNIB TÉ freastal ar chruinniú an GSR ar 18ú Feabhra leis an bealach chun cinn a phlé, ach ní raibh sé in ann freastal. Leis an cheist seo a thabhairt chun cinn tá an GSR ar lorg tuairimí RNIB go foirmeálta i scríbhinn.

As part of this consultation the Director of RNIB NI, was invited to attend the RSG meeting on 18th February, but was unable to attend. In order to progress this matter RSG are formally seeking the views of RNIB in writing. When these views are received a further meeting of an RSG sub-group, specifically formed to take this matter forward, will be scheduled.

Classroom Assistants

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Education (i) to confirm the number of classroom assistants in the South Down constituency who have left their jobs to take up alternative employment; and (ii) to outline the arrangements she has put in place to assist special needs children whose care has been affected.

(AQW 4372/08)

The Minister of Education: During the period 1 September 2007 to 29 February 2008, seven classroom assistants resigned from schools in the South Down constituency area, six of whom worked with children with special needs. This information has been provided by the South Eastern and Southern Education

and Library Boards and relates only to permanent classroom assistants employed by the two Boards.

Tá ar na boird a chinntiú go bhfuil soláthar á dhéanamh le haghaidh riachtanais speisialta oideachais a aithnítear a bheith ag leanai.

Boards are required to ensure that provision is in place to meet the identified special educational needs of a child. Permanent classroom assistants are normally required to give at least one month's notice and any vacancies are advertised without delay. However, given the timescale of the recruitment process, a school may need to engage a temporary classroom assistant or redeploy from existing resources to meet an identified need until a permanent replacement can be recruited. In very exceptional circumstances a child may be required to remain at home on tuition pending a suitable replacement being trained.

GCSE Results

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education to detail for each of the last 3 years (i) the number of pupils that have taken GCSE examinations; and (ii) the percentage of these pupils who achieved grades A* to C; and to outline how these results compare with other regions of the United Kingdom. (AQW 4467/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sa tábla faoi iamh.

The information requested is detailed in the attached table.

	Region	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
(1) Number of pupils entered for GCSE and percentage achieving 1 or more grades at A*-C	North of Ireland			25,792 (80%)	25,635 (80%)	25,736 (81%)
	England			636,771 (79%)	648,942 (80%)	656,432 (83%)
	Wales			38,495 (76%)	38,859 (77%)	39,576 (77%)
(2) Number of pupils entered for GCSE maths and English and the percentage achieving grade A*-C in these subjects	North of Ireland	26,651 (52%)	26,626 (51%)	25,792 (52%)	25,635 (53%)	25,736 (53%)
	England	622,122 (43%)	643,560 (44%)	636,771 (46%)	648,942 (47%)	656,432 (47%)
	Wales	37,993 (41%)	39,212 (42%)	38,495 (43%)	38,859 (45%)	39,576 (46%)
(3) Number of pupils achieving A*-C in GCSE maths and English by gender	North of Ireland (male)	6,142 (45%)	6,067 (45%)	6,122 (46%)	6,163 (47%)	6,338 (48%)
	North of Ireland (female)	7,593 (58%)	7,458 (57%)	7,409 (59%)	7,397 (59%)	7,411 (59%)
	England (male)	124,600 (39%)	130,900 (40%)	135,400 (42%)	141,100 (43%)	143,900 (44%)
	England (female)	142,700 (47%)	151,200 (48%)	156,700 (50%)	162,400 (51%)	166,800 (52%)
	Wales (male)	19,215 (37%)	19,978 (38%)	19,628 (39%)	19,784 (40%)	20,230 (42%)
	Wales (female)	18,778 (45%)	19,234 (46%)	18,867 (48%)	19,075 (50%)	19,346 (50%)
Percentage point change in achievement						
(4) Percentage increase in the number of GCSE A*-C grades achieved by pupils between 1993-1994 and 2003-2004	North of Ireland	76% - 79% (3)				
	England	70% - 76% (6)				
	Wales	64% - 74% (10)				

Notes: (4) The earliest available data for the North of Ireland relates to the 1995/96 academic year.

GCSE Results

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education to detail, for each of the last 5 years (i) the number of pupils who have taken examinations in GCSE English and GCSE Maths; and (ii) the percentage of pupils who achieved grade A* to C in these subjects; and to

outline how these results compare with other regions of the United Kingdom.

(AQW 4468/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sa tábla faoi iamh.

The information requested is detailed in the attached table.

	Region	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
(1) Number of pupils entered for GCSE and percentage achieving 1 or more grades at A*- C	North of Ireland			25,792 (80%)	25,635 (80%)	25,736 (81%)
	England			636,771 (79%)	648,942 (80%)	656,432 (83%)
	Wales			38,495 (76%)	38,859 (77%)	39,576 (77%)
(2) Number of pupils entered for GCSE maths and English and the percentage achieving grade A*-C in these subjects	North of Ireland	26,651 (52%)	26,626 (51%)	25,792 (52%)	25,635 (53%)	25,736 (53%)
	England	622,122 (43%)	643,560 (44%)	636,771 (46%)	648,942 (47%)	656,432 (47%)
	Wales	37,993 (41%)	39,212 (42%)	38,495 (43%)	38,859 (45%)	39,576 (46%)
(3) Number of pupils achieving A*-C in GCSE maths and English by gender	North of Ireland (male)	6,142 (45%)	6,067 (45%)	6,122 (46%)	6,163 (47%)	6,338 (48%)
	North of Ireland (female)	7,593 (58%)	7,458 (57%)	7,409 (59%)	7,397 (59%)	7,411 (59%)
	England (male)	124,600 (39%)	130,900 (40%)	135,400 (42%)	141,100 (43%)	143,900 (44%)
	England (female)	142,700 (47%)	151,200 (48%)	156,700 (50%)	162,400 (51%)	166,800 (52%)
	Wales (male)	19,215 (37%)	19,978 (38%)	19,628 (39%)	19,784 (40%)	20,230 (42%)
	Wales (female)	18,778 (45%)	19,234 (46%)	18,867 (48%)	19,075 (50%)	19,346 (50%)
		Percentage point change in achievement				
(4) Percentage increase in the number of GCSE A*-C grades achieved by pupils between 1993-1994 and 2003-2004	North of Ireland	76% - 79% (3)				
	England	70% - 76% (6)				
	Wales	64% - 74% (10)				

Notes: (4) The earliest available data for the North of Ireland relates to the 1995/96 academic year

GCSE Results

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils achieving grades A* to C in English and Maths, broken down by gender for each of the last 5 years; and to outline how these compare with results in England and Wales.

(AQW 4469/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sa tábla faoi iamh.

The information requested is detailed in the following table.

	Region	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
(1) Number of pupils entered for GCSE and percentage achieving 1 or more grades at A*- C	North of Ireland			25,792 (80%)	25,635 (80%)	25,736 (81%)
	England			636,771 (79%)	648,942 (80%)	656,432 (83%)
	Wales			38,495 (76%)	38,859 (77%)	39,576 (77%)
(2) Number of pupils entered for GCSE maths and English and the percentage achieving grade A*-C in these subjects	North of Ireland	26,651 (52%)	26,626 (51%)	25,792 (52%)	25,635 (53%)	25,736 (53%)
	England	622,122 (43%)	643,560 (44%)	636,771 (46%)	648,942 (47%)	656,432 (47%)
	Wales	37,993 (41%)	39,212 (42%)	38,495 (43%)	38,859 (45%)	39,576 (46%)

	Region	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
(3) Number of pupils achieving A*-C in GCSE maths and English by gender	North of Ireland (male)	6,142 (45%)	6,067 (45%)	6,122 (46%)	6,163 (47%)	6,338 (48%)
	North of Ireland (female)	7,593 (58%)	7,458 (57%)	7,409 (59%)	7,397 (59%)	7,411 (59%)
	England (male)	124,600 (39%)	130,900 (40%)	135,400 (42%)	141,100 (43%)	143,900 (44%)
	England (female)	142,700 (47%)	151,200 (48%)	156,700 (50%)	162,400 (51%)	166,800 (52%)
	Wales (male)	19,215 (37%)	19,978 (38%)	19,628 (39%)	19,784 (40%)	20,230 (42%)
	Wales (female)	18,778 (45%)	19,234 (46%)	18,867 (48%)	19,075 (50%)	19,346 (50%)
		Percentage point change in achievement				
(4) Percentage increase in the number of GCSE A*-C grades achieved by pupils between 1993-1994 and 2003-2004	North of Ireland	76% - 79% (3)				
	England	70% -76% (6)				
	Wales	64% - 74% (10)				

Notes: (4) The earliest available data for the North of Ireland relates to the 1995/96 academic year.

GCSE Results

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage increase in the number of GCSE A* to C grades achieved by pupils between 1993-1994 and 2003-2004; and to outline how these compare with other regions in the United Kingdom. (AQW 4470/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sa tábla faoi iamh.

The information requested is detailed in the attached table.

	Region	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
(1) Number of pupils entered for GCSE and percentage achieving 1 or more grades at A*- C	North of Ireland			25,792 (80%)	25,635 (80%)	25,736 (81%)
	England			636,771 (79%)	648,942 (80%)	656,432 (83%)
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(2) Number of pupils entered for GCSE maths and English and the percentage achieving grade A*-C in these subjects	North of Ireland	26,651 (52%)	26,626 (51%)	25,792 (52%)	25,635 (53%)	25,736 (53%)
	England	622,122 (43%)	643,560 (44%)	636,771 (46%)	648,942 (47%)	656,432 (47%)
	Wales	37,993 (41%)	39,212 (42%)	38,495 (43%)	38,859 (45%)	39,576 (46%)
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	North of Ireland (female)	7,593 (58%)	7,458 (57%)	7,409 (59%)	7,397 (59%)	7,411 (59%)
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	Wales (male)	19,215 (37%)	19,978 (38%)	19,628 (39%)	19,784 (40%)	20,230 (42%)
	Wales (female)	18,778 (45%)	19,234 (46%)	18,867 (48%)	19,075 (50%)	19,346 (50%)
		Percentage point change in achievement				
(4) Percentage increase in the number of GCSE A*-C grades achieved by pupils between 1993-1994 and 2003-2004	North of Ireland	76% - 79% (3)				
	England	70% -76% (6)				
	Wales	64% - 74% (10)				

Notes: (4) The earliest available data for the North of Ireland relates to the 1995/96 academic year

St Comgall's College, Larne

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Education to detail her department's plans for the future of St Comgall's College, Larne. (AQW 4475/08)

The Minister of Education: On 28 February the North Eastern Education and Library Board published a Development Proposal submitted by The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, who act on behalf of the Trustess of St MacNissi's College, St Aloysius High, Cushendall and St Comgall's High Larne, to the effect that the schools will amalgamate on the site of St MacNissi's College with effect from 1 September 2008 or as soon as possible thereafter.

Chuir an foilsíú tús le tréimhse reachtúil comhairliúcháin 2 mhí inar féidir aighneachtaí a chur faoi bhráid na Roinne Oideachais.

The publication initiated a statutory 2-month consultation period during which representations including objections can be made to the Department of Education. At the end of this period I will decide whether to approve the Development Proposal or not taking into account all pertinent issues raised during the period.

Funding Differential

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Education to detail her department's plans to reduce the differential in funding between the primary and post-primary sectors. (AQW 4508/08)

The Minister of Education: As outlined in my announcement of 12 February 2008 on Education funding, provision has been made to increase the proportion of funding made available to primary schools under the delegated Local Management of Schools funding formula, alongside additional funding outside of the formula in support of primary schools.

Under the delegated funding formula I have increased the primary Age Weighted Pupil Unit (AWPU) which is the main funding factor in the formula. This means that, on average, additional primary per pupil increases in 2008/09 are higher than those for post primary schools. I have also signalled my intentions to increase further the primary AWPU weighting over the next two years of this budget period.

Over the next three years, I have been able to secure additional funding of almost £12 million to help primary school teaching principals and a further £32 million to support primary schools with the delivery of the Foundation Stage of the revised curriculum. Additional provision is also planned, over the next three years, for Literacy and Numeracy measures, implementation of the Special Education Needs and Inclusion Review, an Emotional Health and Wellbeing programme in primary

and special education, and additional Early Years provision, etc.

Tá mé tiomanta do dhéanamh cinnte de go mbeidh an deis ag ár leanaí agus ár ndaoine óga go léir an acmhainn atá iontu a chomhlíonadh trí sheirbhísí oideachais den scoth a bheith ar fáil, agus thug mé fios go bhfuil sé ar intinn agam a chinntiú go mbeidh cothromaíocht níos fearr ann maidir leis an maoiniú a chuirtear ar fáil do scoileanna bunoidreachais agus iarbhunoidreachais, agus é sin a dhéanamh laistigh de na hacmhainní atá ar fáil.

I am committed to ensuring that all our children and young people have the opportunity to fulfil their potential through quality education services, and have signalled my intention, within available resources, to improving the balance of funding between primary and post-primary schools.

Independent Schools Counselling Services

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to outline the steps she is taking to ensure that every school is serviced by Independent Schools Counselling services. (AQW 4544/08)

The Minister of Education: Counselling support through the Independent Counselling for Schools Service is currently available in post primary schools only. The support needs of pupils in the primary sector and special needs sectors will be covered in the next phase of development. Plans are in hand to engage with key stakeholders across education, health and social services and the voluntary and statutory sectors who have an expertise in meeting the needs of these children and young people.

Déanfar moltaí maidir le tacaíocht chuí a ullmhú mar chuid de soláthar aon bheart nó seirbhís nua sa tréimhse 2009-2011 agus d'fheadfadh rochtain ar chomhairliú feiliúnach a bheith i gceist.

Proposals for appropriate support, which may include access to suitable counselling, will be prepared for roll out of any action or new services in 2009-2011.

Official Visits

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail, by date and duration, all visits she has made to each of the 18 constituencies since taking up her post. (AQW 4598/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sa tábla faoi iamh.

The information requested is detailed in the attached tables.

**VISITS MADE TO EACH CONSTITUENCY SINCE TAKING UP
POST – 6 MARCH 2008**

Constituency	Date of Visit	Duration of Visit
North Belfast	09/05/07	1 hr
	15/06/07	45mins
	07/08/07	1hr
	14/08/07	1hr
	19/09/07	1hr
	04/10/07	1hr 45mins
	10/10/07	1hr
	08/11/07	1hr
	13/11/07	1hr
	20/02/08	1hr 15mins
	27/02/08	1hr
South Belfast	17/05/07	45mins
	18/05/07	1hr
	05/06/07	1hr
	15/06/07	45mins
	21/06/07	30mins
	27/06/07	1hr
	27/06/07	1hr
	02/07/07	1hr
	01/08/07	45mins
	08/08/07	2hrs
	10/09/07	45mins
	13/09/07	1hr
	17/09/07	30mins
	19/09/07	1hr 15mins
	6/11/07	2hrs
	10/11/07	1hr 15mins
	12/11/07	1hr 20mins
	20/11/07	45mins
	23/01/08	1hr
	30/01/08	1hr
	30/01/08	45mins
	12/02/08	1hr
	20/02/08	1hr
	05/03/08	1hr
East Belfast	31/05/07	1hr
	10/10/07	45mins
	21/11/07	1hr
	21/11/07	30mins
	21/11/07	2hrs 15mins
	30/11/07	1hr
	21/01/08	1hr 30mins
	06/02/08	1hr
	12/02/08	2hrs
	27/02/08	1hr

Constituency	Date of Visit	Duration of Visit
West Belfast	11/05/07	1hr
	12/06/07	1hr
	13/06/07	45mins
	19/06/07	1hr
	26/06/07	1hr
	29/06/07	50mins
	29/06/07	1hr
	08/08/07	2hrs
	21/09/07	1hr
	21/09/07	2hrs
	26/09/07	1hr
	04/10/07	1hr
	12/11/07	1hr 30 mins
	21/11/07	1hr
	28/11/07	35mins
	30/01/08	1hr
	20/02/08	1hr
South Down	11/05/07	1hr
	16/05/07	1hr
	23/05/07	1hr
	12/06/07	1hr
	14/06/07	1hr
	22/06/07	1hr
	18/07/07	1hr
	21/09/07	1hr
	22/09/07	1hr
	28/09/07	1hr
	12/10/07	1hr
	12/10/07	2hrs
	16/10/07	1hr 45mins
	24/10/07	1hr
	26/10/07	1hr
	07/12/07	1hr
	18/12/07	1hr 30mins
	09/01/08	1hr
	11/01/08	1hr
	08/02/08	1hr
	22/02/08	1hr
	29/02/08	1hr
South Belfast	09/05/07	1hr
	09/05/07	1hr
	30/05/07	1hr
	21/11/07	1hr
	05/12/07	1hr 15 mins
	05/12/07	45mins

Constituency	Date of Visit	Duration of Visit
Mid Ulster	09/05/07	1hr
	26/06/07	2hrs
	12/12/07	1hr
North Antrim	17/10/07	30mins
	17/10/07	45mins
	17/10/07	1hr
	17/10/07	1hr
	17/10/07	1hr
	24/10/07	1hr
	24/10/07	1hr
West Tyrone	15/11/07	1hr
	19/12/07	6hrs 30 mins
Newry & Armagh	16/05/07	1hr
	21/05/07	1hr
	24/05/07	1hr 15mins
	09/06/07	2hrs
	20/06/07	45mins
	22/06/07	1hr 45mins
	22/06/07	1hr
	24/07/07	1hr
	09/08/07	45mins
	12/09/07	1hr
	12/09/07	1hr
	12/09/07	1hr
	12/09/07	1hr
	07/11/07	2hrs 30mins
	20/11/07	1hr
	06/12/07	1hr
	13/12/07	2hrs
	17/12/07	2hrs
	18/01/08	4hrs 30mins
Foyle	06/06/07	1hr
	30/06/07	1hr
	19/09/07	2hrs
	27/09/07	1hr
	02/10/07	2hrs
	03/10/07	30mins
	31/10/07	45mins
	05/12/07	1hr
East Derry	06/06/07	1hr
	28/06/07	45mins
	28/06/07	45mins
	28/06/07	45mins
	24/10/07	1hr
	05/12/07	1hr

Constituency	Date of Visit	Duration of Visit
Upper Bann	13/06/07	1hr 15mins
	20/06/07	1hr 30mins
	20/06/07	30mins
	27/06/07	1hr
	27/06/07	1hr
	14/08/07	1hr
	18/09/07	2hrs
East Antrim	15/06/07	1hr
	28/02/08	1hr
Lagan Valley	15/06/07	45mins
	28/06/07	45mins
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	28/06/07	30mins
	04/10/07	1hr 30mins
	19/12/07	1hr 30 mins
North Down	06/03/08	
	06/03/08	
Strangford		

Irish-Medium Sector

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children currently being educated in the Irish-medium sector at (i) primary; and (ii) post primary, level. (AQW 4697/08)

The Minister of Education: Is mar seo a leanas atá an fhaisnéis a hiarradh.

The information requested is as follows.

NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN GRANT AIDED IRISH MEDIUM SCHOOLS AND UNITS 2007/08

	Irish medium schools	Irish medium units	Irish medium schools and units
Primary ¹ schools and units	2,039	614	2,653
Post primary schools and units	506	126	632

Source: NI school census.

Note: 1. Includes children in Year 1 – Year 7.

Pupil Numbers

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children that are currently being educated in the Integrated sector at (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary, level. (AQW 4698/08)

The Minister of Education: Is mar seo a leanas atá an fhaisnéis a hiarradh.

The information requested is as follows.

NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN GRANT AIDED INTEGRATED SCHOOLS 2007/08

Primary ² schools	7,177
Post Primary schools	11,247

Source: NI school census.

Note: Includes Controlled Integrated and Grant Maintained Integrated schools.

Includes children in Year 1 – Year 7

A-Level Subjects

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number; and (ii) the percentage change, of students who have completed A-levels in (a) Maths; (b) Physics; and (c) Technology and Design, in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 4738/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sa tábla faoi iamh.

The information requested is detailed in the attached table:

Subject ¹	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00	00/01	01/02	02/03	03/04	04/05	05/06	06/07
Maths	2,638	2,603 (-1%)	2,475 (-5%)	2,476 (0%)	2,437 (-2%)	2,104 (-14%)	2,078 (-1%)	2,254 (8%)	2,196 (-3%)	2,279 (+4%)	2,462 (+8%)
Physics	1,524	1,480 (-3%)	1,317 (-11%)	1,453 (+10%)	1,486 (+2%)	1,362 (-8%)	1,387 (+2%)	1,349 (-3%)	1,321 (-2%)	1,209 (-8%)	1,257 (+4%)
Design and Technology (D&T)	265	269 (+2%)	279 (+4%)	378 (+35%)	485 (+28%)	142 (-71)	175 (+23%)	227 (+30%)	275 (+21%)	401 (46%)	379 (-5%)
D&T: Systems				4	6 (+50%)	203 (+3,283%)	292 (+44%)	285 (-2%)	251 (-12%)	33 (-87%)	29 (-12%)
D&T: Communication			13	19 (+46%)	15 (-21%)	(-100%)					
D&T: Technology			29	45 (+55%)	57 (+27%)	(-100%)					
D&T: Resistance materials				3	15 (+400%)	(-100%)					
D&T: Design					3	(-100%)					
D&T: Product Design						159	177 (+11%)	242 (+37%)	224 (-7%)	281 (+25%)	313 (+11%)

Notes: Percentage changes in all cases relate to changes from the previous academic year. Figures reflect the entries in specific subject areas, they do not provide an indication of course availability.

1 The subject classification for Design and Technology has changed over time – percentage changes in these specific subject areas should be viewed in this context

Music Courses

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of (i) students that are sitting; and (ii) teachers that are delivering, A-level music courses in the Western Education and Library Board area, broken down by district council area. (AQW 4745/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sa tábla faoi iamh.

The information requested is detailed in the attached table.

District council area	(i) Students enrolled in A level music	(ii) Teachers delivering A level music
Omagh	24	6
Derry	59	9
Strabane	6	3
Fermanagh	32	6
Limavady	*	1

Notes: * Denotes fewer than five pupils

Sexual Offences

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education to detail the lists used by her department to identify Education Board employees, including teachers, who are under restriction in relation to their contact with school pupils, and to confirm whether any current employees have convictions for sexual offences. (AQO 2391/08)

The Minister of Education: Chi Baineann cosaint páistí le gach duine. Caithfidh gach duine i suíomh oideachais céadtosaíocht a thabhairt do na páistí agus na daoine óga faoina gcúram a choinneáil sábháilte.

Child protection is everyone's business. Keeping safe the children and young people in their care must be the top priority for everyone in an educational setting. Child Protection is a serious issue and has been debated here in the Assembly and has been discussed recently at both the North South Ministerial Council and the British Irish Council.

The Department has the power to prohibit a person from teaching or working with children. These powers are contained in Articles 70 and 88A of the

Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 and the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (Northern Ireland) Order 2003. The Education (Prohibition from Teaching or Working with Children) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 set out the procedure to be followed. The Department is required to maintain these names on the Unsuitable Persons list. It is an offence for an individual on either the DHSSPS or DE lists of persons prohibited from working with children or who are the subject of a disqualification order issued by the courts, to knowingly apply for, offer to do, accept or do any work, paid or unpaid, in a regulated position which gives them access to children. It is an offence for an individual to knowingly employ in a regulated position, offer work in a regulated position to, or procure work in a regulated position for, such a person, or fail to remove such a person from such work. Anyone convicted of these offences is liable to punishment by imprisonment or fines or both.

If, in the course of employment, a person who works in a school or for a board in a capacity where they have contact with children, becomes the subject of a police or social services investigation involving child abuse, it is most likely that this individual will be suspended from employment on a precautionary basis. The action to apply a precautionary suspension will be taken on advice from the relevant investigating agency. This action will obviously restrict contact with pupils. The Department is notified by the employing authority of any teachers who are under precautionary suspension. Information about non teaching personnel is not made available to the Department routinely.

If the allegations have been substantiated and following the internal disciplinary process, the employing authority must refer the individual to the Department for consideration for listing.

The Department is not in a position to confirm whether any current employees have convictions for sexual offences. Persons with relevant sexual offences i.e. offences against a child, are listed as unsuitable and would not be employed. Where a person with a conviction for a sexual offence applies for a position in the education sector and is suitable in all other respects, it is a matter for the employing authority to conduct a risk assessment before a decision to employ is made.

Child protection arrangements are kept under continuous review and every effort is made to ensure they are robust. I take any failures to comply with current regulations very seriously (as do my officials) and would ask the Member if he has any specific concerns I would ask him to raise them with me directly.

Pupils Transferring

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the basis on which pupils transferring at age 14 under her proposals, can be refused by the receiving school. (AQO 2429/08)

The Minister of Education: I will be bringing forward detailed proposals on this in due course but I can provide some general points.

Mar léirigh mé go soiléir i mo mholtaí, ní gá go mbeadh gluaiseacht fhisiceach daltaí idir scoileanna in aois a 14 bliana i gceist le roghnú eolach ag 14 bliana.

As I have made clear in my proposals, informed election at 14 need not involve the physical movement of pupils between schools at 14. Alignment to a young person's chosen pathway will take place in the context of the arrangement of post-primary provision within an area, as determined by an area based planning process. In my statement to the Assembly on 4 March I announced the timescale and process for the introduction of full area-based planning.

Second, where informed election at 14 does result in the physical movement of pupils between schools this will take place within a flexible and responsive context where pathways are guaranteed and where oversubscription is less prevalent than under the current system.

Third, election will be informed and based on high quality careers education information advice and guidance, allied to teacher and parental advice.

Fourth, in the event that a school finds itself oversubscribed with applicants at 14, it will select

applicants using non-academic admissions criteria, as is the case currently in the majority of schools.

Free School Meals

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number; and (ii) the percentage, of school children in each Education and Library Board area who are not accessing their entitlement to free school meals; and to outline the action her department is taking to ensure that all children entitled to free school meals receive them. (AQO 2513/08)

The Minister of Education: Figures on the entitlement and uptake of free school meals have been taken from the 2007 School Census and 2007 School Meals Census, conducted in October. The figures are as follows:

	Pupils Entitled to Free School Meals	Pupils not taking up Entitlement to Free School Meals	% Not taking up Entitlement to Free School Meals
BELB	13,662	2,901	21%
NEELB	8,913	2,009	23%
SEELB	8,762	2,767	32%
SELB	11,492	1,727	15%
WELB	13,251	2,420	18%
Total	56,080	11,824	21%

Tá na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne freagrach as béilí scoile in aisce a bhronnadh.

The Education and Library Boards are responsible for the award of free school meals. The Department is continuing, through the Boards, to take steps to improve uptake and to encourage those who meet the eligibility criteria to establish their entitlement.

Among the steps taken to encourage eligible pupils to take up their entitlement to free school meals are: (a) promotional activities (such as drawing attention to availability in schools' Admission Arrangements booklets, and reminding school Principals of the need to encourage uptake); and (b) making it easier to take up entitlement by reducing the bureaucracy associated with making an application.

In addition the Department and the Boards have had preliminary discussions with the Social Security 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.

Post-Primary Education

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Education to outline her plans for post-primary education. (AQO 2472/08)

The Minister of Education: Leag mé amach cur síos ardleibhéil ar mo phleananna d'oideachas iar-bhunscoile ar 4 Nollaig 2007.

I set out a high-level description of my plans for post-primary education on 4 December 2007. I am currently engaging in discussions with educational stakeholders on the detail of the system of transfer that will operate from 2010. I will bring forward proposals resulting from these discussions in the near future. I have also made a statement to the Assembly on 4 March on my proposals for area-based planning. Area-based planning is central to my plans and in my statement I set out the timescale and process for its introduction.

Proposals for Transfer

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons why her proposals for transfer are neither addressed, nor provided for, in the Programme for Government or the Budget; and what action she is taking to remedy this situation. (AQO 2449/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá mo mholtaí i gcomhair Aistrithe mar chuid de phacáiste fadréimseach leasaithe don oideachas iar-bhunscoile – a bhfuil príomhghnéithe de sa Chlár Rialtais agus sa Straitéis Infheistíochta: infheistíocht mhór chaipitil i scoileanna agus planáil bunaithe sa cheantar le heastát scoileanna oiriúnach don fheidhm, inbhuanaithe a sholáthar; straitéis le scoileanna a fheabhsú; agus leasú curaclaim.

My proposals for Transfer are part of a wide-ranging package of reform for post-primary education – key elements of which are in the Programme for Government and the Investment Strategy: extensive capital investment in schools and area-based planning to deliver a fit for purpose and sustainable schools estate; a strategy for school improvement; and curriculum reform.

Secondary Education Facilities

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the proposals to close (i) St Aloysius' High School in Cushendall; and (ii) St Comgall's High School in Larne; and to confirm whether or not new secondary education facilities will

be made available at the St MacNissis College site at Garron Tower. (AQO 2514/08)

The Minister of Education: The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools is currently considering the provision at St Aloysius High School, Cushendall, St Comgall's High School, Larne and St MacNissi's College, Garron Tower. A potential amalgamation is the subject of an Economic Appraisal which is currently underway. Any proposed changes to the schools in the area will need to be subject of development proposal which initiates a two month consultation on the proposal and gives interested parties an opportunity to comment.

Tá sé tuigte agam gur fhoilsigh CSCC, ag gníomhú ar son na n-Iontaobhaithe, Moladh Forbartha ar 28 Feabhra do chónascadh beartaithe na dtrí scoileanna.

I understand that CCMS acting on behalf of the Trustees published a Development Proposal on 28 February for the proposed amalgamation of the three schools.

Composition of School Boards

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the organisations consulted by her department during the preliminary screening of the policy, 'Composition of School Boards of Governors'. (AQO 2468/08)

The Minister of Education: The organisations consulted by my Department during the preliminary screening of the policy, 'Composition of School Boards of Governors' are:

- Association of Head Teachers in Secondary Schools
- Association of Colleges
- Association of School and College Leaders
- Association of Teachers and Lecturers
- C2K (Classroom 2000 ICT system)
- Catholic School Trustees
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment
- DCAL
- DEL
- DHSSPS.
- DOE
- Governing Bodies Association (voluntary grammar schools)
- Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta
- Integrated Education Fund
- National Association of Head Teachers

- National Association of Secondary/Union of Women Teachers
- National Bursars Association
- Community Relations Council
- Equality Commission
- Youth Council
- Youth Forum
- ICTU
- Commissioner for Children and Young People
- Council for Integrated Education
- Human Rights Commission
- General Teachers Council
- OFMDFM
- Regional Training Unit of the 5 Education and Library Boards
- Secondary Heads Association
- Staff Commission of the 5 Education and Library Boards
- Transferors' Representatives Council
- Ulster Teachers Union
- The 5 Education and Library Boards

Common Entrance Exam

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Education to outline the nature of the communication sent by her department to primary schools in relation to a common entrance exam. (AQO 2511/08)

The Minister of Education: Chuir príomhoide bunscoile in iúl domh go raibh iar-bhunscoileanna áirithe i dteagmháil lena mbunscoileanna friothálacha faoi Chomhscrúdú Iontrála.

It has been brought to my attention by a primary school principal that certain post-primary schools have been communicating with their feeder primary schools on the subject of a Common Entrance Exam. I have responded to that principal explaining that the prospect of an independent Common Entrance Exam is one fraught with administrative and litigious risks. I have also emphasised that the delivery of the revised curriculum to all children in a way that meets their needs remains the priority for primary schools. This is needed within a wider package of post-primary reform in which my March 4th statement on area-based planning was a key element.

Composition of School Boards

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Education to detail the plans she has in place to ensure that equality is achieved on school Governing Boards, in light of

the Review of Public Administration process.
(AQO 2464/08)

The Minister of Education: My policy proposals in relation to the Composition of School Boards of Governors have been subject to consultation with stakeholder interests and an equality screening process. I plan to undertake a second equality screening process on the subordinate legislation that will contain the detail of the new arrangements. Also, I plan to initiate a new monitoring system under the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) for the purpose of assessing uptake of the Section 75 requirements in relation to the membership of the school Boards of Governors on a cross sectoral basis and for the purpose of keeping recruitment practices under review.

Beidh bailiú sonraí ag an ÚOS ag brath ar chomhoibriú deonach ghobharnóirí scoile.

The collection of data by the ESA will be dependent on the voluntary co-operation of school governors.

Alternative Education Projects

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Education to detail the plans her department has to fund alternative education projects in West Belfast that are currently funded by Peace II.
(AQO 2510/08)

The Minister of Education: Ba chóir dom a rá nach maoiníonn mo Roinn tionscadail mhalartacha oideachais go díreach in Iarthar Bhéal Feirste nó in áiteanna eile sa Tuaisceart.

I should explain that my Department does not directly fund alternative education projects in West Belfast or in other parts of the North. It provides funding to the Education and Library Boards for alternative education provision and it is for them to decide how this can be used to best meet the needs of the young people in their area. The Belfast Education and Library Board is responsible for ensuring that children and young people, who live in West Belfast, are provided with suitable education. It operates and funds a statutory Alternative Education Programme at Loughshore Educational Resource Centre as well as funding places within community based provision at Newstart, The Bridge and Conway Education Centre. I understand that the Belfast Board has no plans to extend provision at this time.

My Department has been undertaking a review of alternative education provision and work is in hand to develop a model of provision which will apply across all Education and Library Board areas. I expect policy proposals to be with me shortly. The agreed proposals will be the subject of public consultation later this year. I hope you will appreciate that, until this process

has been completed, I am not in a position to give a definitive answer as to how alternative education provision will be funded in the future.

Composition of School Boards

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons why the policy on 'Composition of School Boards of Governors', need not be subject to an equality impact assessment, in light of the preliminary screening process.
(AQO 2467/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá rún agam cumhacht a ghlacadh chugam féin sa Bhille Oideachas ARP athruithe a dhéanamh i socruithe rialachas scoile trí fho-reachtaíocht nua.

I propose to take a power in the RPA Education Bill to make changes to the school governance arrangements through new subordinate legislation. I will carry out a second equality screening process on the subordinate legislation and I will reconsider the need for an equality impact assessment in light of the responses to both screening processes. In any event, I plan to ensure that, where there is under-representation of minority groups such as ethnic minorities or people with a disability, action is taken to encourage more applicants from these sections of the community to come forward to serve as school governors.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education to outline the steps she is taking to ensure that her proposals in relation to post-primary transfer are in line with legislation that safeguards academic selection.
(AQO 2501/08)

The Minister of Education: Beidh na gníomhartha a dhéanfaidh mé mar gheall ar aistriú iar-bhunscoile de réir an tseasaimh reachtaigh ar roghnú acadúil.

The steps I will take in relation to post-primary transfer will be in line with the legislative position on academic selection. This position is that Article 28 (2) of the 2006 Education Order abolishes the use of academic admissions criteria. Article 28 (2) is not commenced and to be commenced will require a Commencement Order laid before and approved by resolution of the Assembly.

This position does not safeguard academic selection. What it does is make the introduction of new admissions criteria regulations contingent on a resolution of the future of academic selection. Without this resolution and without these regulations there will simply be an absence of law and an unregulated system. A lapse into un-regulation would not, I believe, safeguard academic selection as independent and unregulated

academic selection is a prospect fraught with administrative and litigious perils.

This is why I have always been clear on the need for consensus as I believe that is what the position requires of us. It is my intention to bring forward proposals reflecting this legislative position and also, reflecting the wider need for reform in post-primary education. My March 4 statement on area-based planning was a key element of this wider process.

School Closures

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether there will be school closures in the Coleraine Borough Council area. (AQO 2396/08)

The Minister of Education: Ní feasach mé aon mholtaí do dhruidim scoileanna i gceantar Chomhairle Baile Chúil Raithin.

I am not aware of any proposals for school closures in the Coleraine Borough Council area. I am aware that the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) are currently considering a possible amalgamation in the Kilrea area. This is at a very early stage and no proposals have as yet been submitted to the Department.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Education Centres at Carrowdore and Kircubbin

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the decision his department has made in relation to the future of (i) the Ballyboley Centre, Carrowdore; and (ii) the centre at Blackhall Street, Kircubbin. (AQW 4513/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The Ballyboley Centre, Carrowdore and the centre at Blackhall Street, Kircubbin 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.

Ballyboley Centre, Carrowdore

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will consider introducing certified and uncertified streams for courses provided for at Ballyboley Centre, Carrowdore. (AQW 4514/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: It is the responsibility of each of the individual Further Education colleges, not the Department for Employment and Learning, to decide on the courses it wishes to offer. The Department does not intervene in this process. Therefore, the provision to be offered at the Ballyboley Centre, Carrowdore is an issue for the South Eastern Regional College.

Ballyboley Centre, Carrowdore

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if his department will consider (i) advertising in the local press; and (ii) issuing leaflets, to promote the classes at the Ballyboley Centre, Carrowdore. (AQW 4515/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Further Education colleges, and not the Department for Employment and Learning, are responsible for advertising and promoting the courses they offer. The issue of advertising and promoting classes at the Ballyboley Centre at Carrowdore is, therefore, a matter for the South Eastern Regional College.

Construction Industry Training Board

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the role and function of the Construction Industry Training Board. (AQW 4522/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Construction Industry Training Board was formally established under the Industrial Training Act (Northern Ireland) 1964 and subsequently amended by the 1984 Industrial Training Order to "encourage the adequate training of persons employed in or intending to be employed in the construction industry in Northern Ireland." The legislation enables the raising of a statutory levy for this purpose. The activities which it undertakes in any particular year are set out in its annual report, the most recent of which, for 2005/06, is available on the CITBNI website.

Ballyboley Centre, Carrowdore

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to explain why the prospectus for Ballyboley Centre, Carrowdore, was delayed in September 2007. (AQW 4566/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Further Education colleges are responsible for the production of their promotional material, including the production of prospectuses. The issue of the delayed prospectus for Ballyboley Centre, Carrowdore, is therefore, a matter for the South Eastern Regional

College. However, my Department has confirmed with the college that the delay was caused by its need to ensure a consistent approach to course delivery across the colleges that were merging in August 2007. The college has advised that it would normally expect to have its part time prospectus available during the first week in May. On this occasion, the enrolment information was available on the college's internet site on 24 May 2007, and was available in hard copy from 15 June 2007.

Open College Network

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he has given any consideration to any other types of funding through Open College Network (OCN) for Ballyboley Centre, Carrowdore.

(AQW 4567/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Open College Network is a qualification awarding body and does not fund the providers, such as Further Education Colleges, who may use the courses they make available. In addition, the Department does not fund awarding bodies. Therefore, the question of funding the Ballyboley Centre, Carrowdore through the Open College Network does not arise.

Training for Success Contracts

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the concerns his department has identified with the tendering process for the Training for Success contracts; and (ii) the number of training organisations that have received warnings in relation to the implementation of Training for Success contracts.

(AQW 4626/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Contracts for the delivery of the Training for Success programme were awarded following an open competitive tendering process in accordance with the 12 principles of the Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy as laid down by the Executive in May 2002 and the Department of Finance and Personnel's, Central Procurement Directorate, procedures, which are quality assured and meet the ISO 9002 standards. The Department is content with the advice and guidance received from the Central Procurement Directorate during the tendering and awarding of contracts for Training for Success, and as such has not identified any area of concern.

No other Training Organisations have received warnings from the Central Procurement Directorate in respect of Training for Success apart from Carter and Carter.

Training for Success Contracts

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to confirm (i) if any contracts awarded under the tendering process for Training for Success are giving rise to concern; and (ii) if the withdrawal of the Training for Success contract with Carter and Carter highlights flaws in the conduct of the tendering process generally.

(AQW 4707/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: (i)

In line with the Department's standard monitoring of contracts under Training for Success, to date a number of compliance visits by my Officials to Training Organisations have been carried out, with the remainder due to be completed by the 31st March 2008. To date, none of the visits, with the exception of Carter & Carter, identified any issues which would give my Department cause for concern in respect of the contracts awarded.

(ii) My Department does not consider the tendering process contributed to Carter & Carter's inability to deliver on its contractual obligations nor has it identified flaws of a general nature in the tendering process.

Termination of Training for Success Contracts

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the reasons for the termination of the Training for Success contract with Carter and Carter; and (ii) the amount of public monies that were paid to Carter and Carter over the period of the contract; and to confirm if proceedings will be taken against Carter and Carter to recover public funds.

(AQW 4708/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: (i)

Following an independent inspection carried out by the Education and Training Inspectorate in January 2008 which revealed a number of inadequacies in the delivery of the training, the Department sought assurances from the Company that it could honour its contractual obligations. The Department was advised that the assurances required from the Company to continue with the provision could not be given and the contract ended on 1 March.

(ii) To date, no funding has been paid to Carter & Carter in respect of their Training for Success contract. However, Carter & Carter have still to submit claims up until the date of the ending of the contract of 1 March 2008. In line with standard practice, these claims shall be withheld until the Department's Financial Audit & Support Team (FAST) has completed a closure audit inspection visit. The FAST inspection shall determine the extent to which Carter & Carter have met its contractual obligations as regards

compliance with Departmental Guidelines. Where necessary, the Department shall effect recovery of funding through deduction from the claims withheld.

Apprenticeships

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the current apprenticeships available in the East Antrim constituency, broken down by district council area. (AQW 4766/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In the East Antrim constituency, there are 3 contract management areas for the delivery of Training for Success. These contract management areas equate approximately to the local district council areas of Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownabbey.

The following Training for Success Apprenticeship Training Frameworks are currently available under these contract management areas in the East Antrim constituency:

- All 3 District Council Areas – Level 2 Apprenticeships
- Accounting
- Advice and Guidance
- Aeronautical Engineering
- Agricultural Industry
- Amenity Horticulture
- Animal Care
- Beauty Therapy
- Business & Administration
- Call Handling
- Catering & Hospitality
- Childcare Learning & Development
- Construction Industry Occupations
- Construction Industry – Wood and Decorative Occupations
- Construction Industry – Plant Maintenance
- Craft Baking
- Distribution & Warehousing
- Electricity Distribution
- Engineering Industry
- Engineering Technical Support
- Food & Drink Manufacturing Operations
- Furniture Production
- Glass Industry
- Hairdressing
- Health & Social Services
- Horse Industry
- IT Users
- IT Services and Development
- Land Based Engineering
- Meat Industry
- Mechanical Engineering Services – Plumbing and HVACR (Heating, Ventilation, Air-Conditioning and Refrigeration)
- Motor Vehicle Body Repair
- Motor Vehicle Maintenance and Repair
- Performing Engineering Operations
- Polymer Processing and Sign-making
- Printing
- Retail
- Security Systems
- Sport & Recreation
- Team Leading
- Telecommunications Industry
- Travel Services
- Newtownabbey & Larne – Level 2 Apprenticeships
- Motor Vehicle Industry
- Painting & Decorating
- All 3 District Council Areas – Level 3 Apprenticeships
- Animal Care
- Business & Administration
- Construction Crafts
- Craft Baking
- Distribution & Warehousing
- Electricity Distribution Transmission Engineering
- Electrotechnical Services
- Engineering
- Engineering – Mechanical Manufacturing
- Equine Industry
- Food & Drink Manufacturing Operations
- Furniture Production
- Hairdressing
- Health & Social Care
- HVACR
- IT Services & Development
- Livestock Production and Mixed Farming
- Management
- Meat Processing
- Mechanical Engineering Services – Plumbing
- Pre-Press and Desktop Publishing
- Print Administration
- Print Production
- Rail Engineering
- Retail

- Security Systems Technician
- Sign Making
- Transmission Engineering
- Newtownabbey Only – Level 3 Apprenticeships
- Childcare, Learning & Development
- Barbering
- Aeronautical Engineering
- Engineering Technical Support
- Carrickfergus Only – Level 3 Apprenticeships
- Travel Services
- Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus – Level 3 Apprenticeships
- Hospitality & Catering
- Active Leisure Operations
- Playwork
- Amenity Horticulture
- Contact Centre Operation

Training for Success

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to confirm if his department (i) is currently reviewing the contract and study time of participants in the Training for Success and Job Ready schemes; and (ii) will renegotiate scheme durations with providers to streamline contract time to suit Further Education College academic years. (AQW 4807/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department has been meeting with all Suppliers delivering training under Training for Success to discuss possible adjustments to the provision. These revisions include a re-structuring of the contact and study time of participants and are being designed primarily to meet the needs of the young people. The revisions being proposed are not being made to suit Further Education academic years, but have thus far been developed as a general consensus from all Suppliers involved in the discussions. When this work is completed, the Department will be in a position to consult with the Committee for Employment and Learning on the proposed revisions by the end of April 2008.

Expenditure on Newspapers

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the amount his department has spent on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in each of the last three years. (AQW 4852/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The attached table sets out the expenditure incurred by

the Department for Employment and Learning in each of the last three financial years: 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07 broken down between newspaper and publications, the latter includes magazines and periodicals. A forecast for the current financial year 2007/08 has also been provided.

	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08*
Newspapers	£10,419	£10,351	£9,424	£9,339
Publications	£43,221	£47,263	£51,872	£51,301
Total	£53,640	£57,614	£61,296	£60,640

*Provisional

Audit Compliance

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what consideration has been given to reducing the burden of audit compliance on universities. (AQO 2421/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In the main, the audit and accountability arrangements which apply to the Northern Ireland universities are similar to those which apply to institutions in England.

In response to a report in 2005 by the Higher Education Regulation Review Group, all four funding bodies across the UK have been developing an increasingly “light touch” approach. In December 2005, my Department hosted officials from the two universities and the Teacher Education institutions, as well as the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Northern Ireland Audit Office, to ascertain the areas which the institutions felt represented a disproportionate accountability burden. This work is continuing and my Department remains committed to working with the institutions to achieve a balance which provides a level of accountability appropriate to the significant investment of public funds which our universities receive but which is not unnecessarily burdensome.

Audit Compliance

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the consideration that has been given to reducing the burden of audit compliance on Further Education colleges. (AQO 2416/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The audit requirements of the sector comply with all appropriate guidance and best practice issued by the Department of Finance and Personnel, HM Treasury and the Northern Ireland Audit Office. The audit requirements of the Further Education Sector are reviewed regularly to ensure that they continue to comply with best practice, ensuring the most

appropriate levels of accountability, regularity and probity.

Community and Voluntary Sectors

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the steps he is taking to ensure that education and training services that are delivered by the community and voluntary sectors will continue to receive funding. (AQO 2493/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department does not core fund voluntary and community sector education and training organisations. However, under the Department's Training for Success programme, a number of community training organisations have been awarded contracts for aspects of that programme's delivery.

The Department's existing contractual arrangements with two voluntary organisations, the Workers' Educational Association and the Ulster People's College for the delivery of a small number of Further Education courses, will end in August 2008.

However, the Department is developing proposals for learner support arrangements between Further Education Colleges and third party organisations, including voluntary and community groups, to commence, on a pilot basis, in September 2008.

North/South Developments

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is his assessment of the scoping study on the potential for co-operation and merger between the University of Ulster and the Letterkenny Institute; and whether or not he considers that opportunities exist for similar north-south developments. (AQO 2452/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I welcome the aims of this scoping study since it will be concerned with identifying course provision that is targeted towards the needs of society and the economy in the North-West, and the development of high value-added, high wage jobs.

As autonomous institutions, the universities can, and do, explore opportunities for north-south co-operation in higher education and I am very supportive of this.

Construction Industry

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail his strategy to assist the construction industry. (AQO 2498/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am supportive of the Construction Skills Sector Skills Council, which has produced a Sector Skills Agreement covering the Northern Ireland construction sector. This Sector Skills Agreement is the main tool for setting and taking forward a strategy on skills for the sector.

Innovation Fund

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to confirm (i) the total amount allocated to the proposed Innovation Fund; (ii) the amounts allocated to his department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment respectively; and (iii) the amount contributed to the Fund by the Government of the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 2461/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As detailed in the Final Budget 2008-11 document:

(i) The total amount allocated to the proposed Innovation Fund is £90m over the Budget 2008/11 period;

(ii) Of this, the amounts allocated to the Department for Employment and Learning and Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment are £40.1m and £14.2m respectively;

(iii) The amount contributed to the fund by the Government of the Republic of Ireland is €60m.

Appleby Trust

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline his plans to support funding for programmes for people with learning disabilities, in particular the Appleby Trust in Armagh City. (AQO 2491/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department for Employment and Learning has in place a range of programmes and services for people with learning disabilities. For example, the Disablement Advisory Service funds a range of employment programmes to assist people with disabilities find and keep appropriate employment. The contracts to deliver these programmes are awarded as a result of publicly advertised tendering exercises under the control of the Central Procurement Directorate of the Department of Finance and Personnel.

In addition, the Department supports the enrolment of students with disabilities by providing £1.5 million from its Additional Support Fund to help Colleges provide extra support such as brailers, signers and assistive technology. In addition, £1.5 million has been set aside to cover the cost of discrete provision in

Colleges and outcentres for students for whom mainstream courses are not suitable. Where mainstream courses are not appropriate, Colleges collaborate with adult day centres to provide training and development opportunities on discrete courses in various locations for young people such as those with severe learning difficulties.

The Department for Employment and Learning does not provide core funding to individual organisations. The Department does not fund the Appleby Trust, nor has it been approached by the Trust for funding.

I understand that the Appleby Trust has now secured funding from an anonymous benefactor which will be matched by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust for a year.

Immigrant Communities

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what special measures have been introduced to help with the specific training and employment needs of the growing Polish, Portuguese, Latvian, Lithuanian and Chinese communities. (AQO 2402/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The provision by my Department is open to all and is in no way restricted to people from particular communities. As part of its current planning of the 2008 Training for Success promotional campaign, the Department is considering the inclusion of multilingual brochures and information sheets. Additionally the Department provides English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses as part of its mainstream Further Education provision. ESOL provision is given the highest weighting within the Further Education Funding Formula with no cap on provision. Colleges have their own fee policies, and may or may not charge fees to students.

The Department's range of employment programmes are designed largely to support those clients who are in receipt of state benefits. However, the Employment Service also provides advice and guidance to non-benefit clients, including migrant jobseekers, and those who are eligible can access job vacancies through the internet on JobcentreonlineNI.com. Information and advice is available in different languages online or by request.

Training for Success Contract

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is his assessment of whether or not Carter and Carter is fulfilling the terms of its Training for Success Contract; and to outline the contingencies

that are in place in the event of the contract being terminated. (AQO 2451/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: An inspection of the training provision provided by Carter & Carter was commissioned by my Department from the Education and Training Inspectorate in January 2008. This revealed a number of deficiencies resulting in the Department of Finance and Personnel's Central Procurement Directorate advising the Company that a breach of contract had occurred. The Company was asked to remedy the inadequacies by 1 March.

The Company informed Central Procurement Directorate on 28 February that it cannot give the assurances and guarantees required to continue with the provision and as such the contract with the Company will end on 1 March.

My officials are currently arranging for the trainees to be accommodated by other Training Organisations to enable their training to continue.

Ballyboley Centre, Carrowdore

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the consultation that took place prior to the decision to increase the fees for courses at the Ballyboley Centre at Carrowdore. (AQO 2483/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Further Education colleges are responsible for setting their own fees policies, and for conducting public consultation exercises where relevant and appropriate. Therefore, the level of fees set for courses at the Ballyboley Centre at Carrowdore is a matter for the South Eastern Regional College.

Research and Development Spending

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the proportion of all research and development spending in Northern Ireland that is in universities. (AQO 2418/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The higher education component of the total Research and Development (R&D) spend in Northern Ireland is 47%.

This percentage is based on the most recent (2006) figures supplied by the Office for National Statistics/ Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment which show that higher education expenditure on research and development (R&D) was £150.1 million out of a total Northern Ireland General Investment of £319.2 million.

Industrial Tribunals

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of cases currently before Industrial Tribunals. (AQO 2415/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: At 28 February 2008, there were 7296 “live” cases with the Tribunals. This is comprised of 7095 cases with the Industrial Tribunals and 201 with the Fair Employment Tribunal. Of the 7095 Industrial Tribunal cases there are 3831 multiple claims with the Industrial Tribunals and a further 1485 claims relating to various (mainly multiple) pension complaints. Multiple claims are where more than 5 employees bring a common complaint against a common respondent.

Access Courses

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students who undertook access courses in each of the last three years. (AQO 2436/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The table below details Student numbers on Access to Higher Education courses in the Northern Ireland Further Education sector from 2004/05 to 2006/07.

Academic Year	Student Numbers
2004/05	832
2005/06	795
2006/07	616

Source: Further Education Statistical Record

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Industrial Land in West Belfast

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of industrial land in West Belfast, held by Invest NI, that is immediately available for the provision of advanced factories. (AQW 4259/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): As at 31 October 2007, Invest NI held circa 185 acres of land at 7 locations in the West Belfast parliamentary constituency of which circa 32 acres are available as serviced sites for lease to client companies. The details of the landholding at each location can be found on the attached table.

Invest NI land is held exclusively for its client companies with an immediate demonstrable business need and an approved business case. The sites are suitable for a range of uses including factories.

Invest NI maintains a 10-year outlook on property needs throughout Northern Ireland and reviews these plans on an annual basis. The most recent review did not identify any surplus land in West Belfast. Current indications are that the agency may look towards acquiring additional land for Economic / Industrial development in WBGS in 6-8 years.

Invest NI client demand for land is at a record level, primarily reflecting increased business confidence but also, no doubt, influenced by the rising cost of land. Land that has previously remained vacant for many years is now much more attractive and subject to client interest. Should this level of demand continue, and it shows no sign of abating, the land bank will be fully let within the next 5 to 7 years.

ANNEX A

INVEST NI LAND HOLDING IN THE WEST BELFAST PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY (AS AT 31 OCTOBER 2007)

Industrial Estate	Town/City	Parliamentary Constituency	Land Holding	Available Land
Springvale	Belfast	Belfast West	47	2
Forthriver	Belfast	Belfast West	23	13
Glen Road	Belfast	Belfast West	16	1
Whiterock	Belfast	Belfast West	12	3
Ballygomartin	Belfast	Belfast West	10	0.00
Kennedy Way	Belfast	Belfast West	2	0.00
Springbank	Belfast	Belfast West	75	13
Total			185	32

For consistency of reporting and analysis, site availability data is fixed on specific dates and is updated approx every 6 months.

Maze Site

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the plans his department has to market tourism centred on the proposed conflict

transformation centre at the Maze site; and to outline (i) the nature of the promotion; (ii) the aspects of the site it will focus on; and (iii) the markets that will be targeted. (AQW 4548/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

No discussions have taken place to date between DETI or NITB and OFMDFM regarding any potential tourism promotion of the proposed ICCT

As the project is still to be approved, it would be premature to speculate further on any marketing strategy

Invest NI Grant

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the percentage of Invest NI grant aided businesses that are located (i) in Co Fermanagh; and (ii) in Co Tyrone. (AQW 4581/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Invest NI does not present information on the basis of Northern Ireland counties. However, information is available for those District Council Areas (DCA) contained within the boundaries of Fermanagh and Tyrone. The boundary of Fermanagh DCA is almost contiguous with that of Co. Fermanagh, and the DCAs of Cookstown, Dungannon, Omagh and Strabane are closely aligned to that of Co. Tyrone.

The number of businesses in these areas, which have been offered assistance by Invest NI during the five year period since its inception in April 2002, is presented in the table below. This is also expressed as a percentage of the total number of businesses in Northern Ireland which were offered assistance during the same time period.

District Council Areas	Number of businesses offered assistance	% of total
Fermanagh	1,116	5.5
Cookstown, Dungannon, Omagh and Strabane	2,552	12.6

It should be noted that these areas are not self-contained labour markets. A project assisted in a particular location has the potential to create benefits across a much wider area. Northern Ireland is a relatively small place and evidence indicates that many investments draw their workforce from areas beyond constituency and council area boundaries. In addition, Invest NI has limited scope for 'directing' investment to specific geographic areas. While Invest NI has been able to influence the location decisions of some inward-investment projects, most new inward investment, which is primarily service based, locate in the two main cities where skilled labour supply is more accessible. In the case of established businesses,

reinvestment patterns will often be determined by the existing location of the business.

Trading Standards

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the enforcement role of trading standards, particularly in respect of false and misleading advertising aimed at young people. (AQO 2444/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

My Department, through its Trading Standards Service, has responsibility for enforcing a wide range of consumer protection legislation. The Service has regularly taken enforcement action where there has been admissible evidence of false or misleading advertising in breach of one or other of these consumer protection laws. In the last three years there have been 10 successful prosecutions. The advertising concerned is usually directed at consumers generally rather than being targeted at young people.

Broadband Provision

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the strategies he will employ to reduce the cost of, and improve the service of, broadband provision via satellite. (AQO 2499/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The contract that my Department has with BT for 100% broadband access caps the price of broadband to households at £27 per month and £70 for installation. The quality of the satellite product fully meets the specification in the contract and this has been independently verified on a number of occasions in the last 3 years. That said, my officials are currently investigating a range of alternate technical solutions which may in future be deployed where broadband cannot be delivered over telephone wires

Draft Regional Innovation Strategy

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline his plans to consult smaller businesses and local enterprises in relation to the Draft Regional Innovation Strategy. (AQO 2492/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

I have interpreted this question as referring to the current draft of the Regional Innovation Strategy Action Plan.

During the preparation of this Plan, there has been consultation with a wide range of stakeholders both in the public and private sectors. This included engage-

ment with a number of small businesses who participated in an information gathering workshop; and meetings with the Federation of Small Businesses.

As a result, the Action Plan includes a range of measures to specifically address the needs of small businesses and local enterprises. These include raising awareness of the importance of innovation; support to undertake research and, very importantly, support to build the capacity of small business to be innovative and thereby, be more successful.

In addition to consultations with public and private stakeholders, the ETI Committee, the EDF Innovation Sub Group, and the N. Ireland Science Industry Panel have also had the opportunity to input to the process. I intend to bring the final draft to the Executive for agreement ahead of publication by the end of April.

Collaborative Networks Team

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any plans he has to encourage the use of 'clustering' in certain sectors, with a view to sharing knowledge, and increasing growth and export potential. (AQO 2424/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI has been active in this area for a number of years and in August 2006 established a dedicated Collaborative Networks Team. It is currently supporting networking in a number of sectors including BioBusiness, Composite Textiles, Plastics and Polymers, Biomass, Energy Technology, Digital Media, Bakeries, Health Care Informatics and Homeland Security.

Invest NI works closely with other economic development bodies across the British Isles to promote the concepts of clustering and collaborative networking and to develop 'best practice' tools and techniques in this area.

Recent activities include the launch of the NI Digital Content Strategy and the issue of a public call for industry-led Collaborative Networks proposals. A budget of £2.5m has been allocated to support eligible projects.

In addition, the work of MATRIX, the Northern Ireland Science Industry Panel, also has potential to feed into this area. I understand that MATRIX has already begun to explore some issues of cooperation between businesses within, and across, high technology sectors as well as with academia and Government

Energy from Waste

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of

proposals and measures to increase the generation of energy from waste. (AQO 2437/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Energy generated from waste has the potential to contribute to Northern Ireland's target of 12% of electricity to be consumed from indigenous renewable sources by 2012, of which 15% is to be from non-wind sources. The Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) continues to offer support for wind and non-wind renewable sources. The Environment and Renewable Energy Fund included an allocation of £18m of assistance for 3 or 4 Energy from Waste flagship projects. The shortlisted projects are now in the final stages of appraisal.

The Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy published by the Department of Environment recognises that energy from waste will be a necessary component of the preferred infrastructure to meet targets and divert waste from landfill. The £200 million Strategic Waste Infrastructure Fund, approved as part of the 2008-11 budget, will assist local government in developing the required infrastructure that will include energy from waste facilities.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) outlined its assessment of the potential for energy production from farm waste in its Renewable Energy Action Plan. DARD recognises that renewable energy technologies may create opportunities for livestock farmers as assessed and reported by the Expert Group on Alternative Use of Manures (EGAUM) in March 2006. Currently work is underway to establish a Renewable Energy Centre of Excellence at Hillsborough which will further identify the potential for energy production from waste

Potential of Orangefest

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the contribution Tourism Ireland is making to ensure the development of the tourist potential of Orangefest and other aspects of the Orange and Protestant tradition. (AQO 2469/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Tourism Ireland continues to be engaged in discussions with the Orange Order, Orangefest and others interests in Northern Ireland with regard to the 12th of July and the portrayal of other aspects of Northern Ireland culture and heritage.

Tourism Ireland has participated in meetings with the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland in advising on tourism matters and has attended Loyal Order parades over the last three years. Tourism Ireland has also contributed to the Orange Standard on the subject of tourism and the 12th of July and has recently presented

on its role and activities to representatives of 10 District Lodges regarding flagship parades in 2008

Heating Oil

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for his assessment of the effect of the rising costs of heating oil on small businesses.

(AQO 2406/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Global oil prices have risen significantly over recent years, with the last year seeing an increase of some 60%. Inevitably this has pushed up the cost of oil products such as heating oil with consequences for many consumers in Northern Ireland, including the small business sector. Although my Department has limited policy levers to significantly influence energy prices, which are ultimately driven by global trends, its overall strategic energy objective is to ensure a competitive, sustainable and reliable energy market at minimum cost.

DETI's support for the continued expansion of the natural gas network is aimed at providing a more efficient and lower carbon fuel choice, particularly for business consumers. The promotion of renewable energy sources, coupled with energy efficiency measures supported by Invest NI and the Carbon Trust, encourages business customers to reduce their energy usage and overall fossil fuel dependency.

In addition, the creation of the Single Electricity Market should encourage greater competition as well as delivering operational efficiencies in the longer term, both of which will benefit all consumers.

Northern Ireland Tourism

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline (i) his assessment of the effectiveness of the marketing of Northern Ireland for tourism purposes in Great Britain; and (ii) the proposals he has to increase the marketing budget.

(AQO 2434/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Since its inception in 2001, Tourism Ireland has been responsible for marketing Northern Ireland in Great Britain, and, in that time, nearly 9.5 million visitors spending some £1.5 billion have visited Northern Ireland from Great Britain. Great Britain is our most important market, and every effort must be made, through carefully targeted campaigns, to maximise its potential. I was pleased to have been able to launch a new GB campaign earlier this month, on behalf of Tourism Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, aimed specifically at increasing the number of

visitors from Scotland and the North of England. More can, however, be done, and I will continue to monitor progress very carefully.

Tourism Ireland's budget for 2008/09 and beyond includes provision for increased effort in the GB market, and I look forward to hearing their proposals for the best use of these resources

Direct Funding

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of jobs created in Armagh City and district in the last five years as a result of direct funding from his department; and (ii) the number of jobs his department aims to create in the future as a result of direct funding.

(AQO 2489/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Between 1st April 2002 and 31st March 2007, Invest NI offered £2.3 million of assistance towards inward investment projects in the Armagh District Council area which plan to create 413 new jobs.

In addition to this, Invest NI offered £10.3m of assistance towards projects undertaken by its locally-owned clients, leveraging gross investment of £47.3 million. Although the agency does not record the number of jobs promoted by this assistance, supporting its clients to grow and become more successful in export markets will inevitably lead to increased and improved employment opportunities in the area.

DETI itself, through the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (Peace II), has part-assisted the creation of 67 jobs to date in the Armagh City and District Council area, with the aim of creating a total of 173 jobs by 2015 through the development of 53,300sq ft of workspace in the locality.

With regard to the next three years, my Department has not attributed inward investment job targets to specific geographical regions of Northern Ireland. Invest NI's role is to promote the whole of NI as a viable and attractive location for foreign companies to invest in.

In total over the next three financial years (2008/09-2010/11), Invest NI plans to promote 6,500 new jobs in Northern Ireland. The emphasis will be on promoting higher value-added jobs with a target of 5,500 of the total jobs attracting salaries above the NI Private Sector Median.

Northern Ireland Tourism

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the actions being taken

to develop the tourism potential of country sports.
(AQO 2411/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) works with partners to promote access to the countryside and to support product development.

The NITB and Tourism Ireland consumer websites (www.discovernorthernireland.com and www.discoverireland.com) provide an extensive range of information on countryside based activities including angling, archery, equestrian pursuits, hill walking, sailing and rambling. The websites provide links and contact details for countryside activity and facility providers.

NITB also produces a brochure entitled Adventure Northern Ireland in partnership with the Countryside Access and Activities Network.

Life Sciences Sector

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment he has made of (i) the contribution of the Life Sciences sector to the economy; and (ii) the prospects for this contribution to grow; and to detail the links that have been created with foreign companies in relation to research and development.
(AQO 2435/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
Life Sciences is recognised as a priority sector in contributing to the development of a sustainable knowledge-based economy in Northern Ireland. The sector consists of approximately 50 companies, employing 4,100 and generating £350 million turnover per annum.

In the region of £40m of assistance has been offered by Invest NI in the last 3 and half years and there is a strong pipeline of projects currently under consideration. For example, support to the Almac Group has enabled this global integrated pharmaceutical services company to increase employment to 1,300 at its Craigavon headquarters; an increase of 300 jobs since 2005. These jobs are high value with average salaries almost double the Northern Ireland private sector average.

Northern Ireland has a strong and growing international reputation in Life Sciences research. For example, Invest NI recently supported the establishment in Larne of a centre of excellence for research into novel oral dosage forms, by the US owned Warner Chilcott company. Assistance has also been provided for a number of university proof of concept collaborations, including research undertaken by Queens and the Scripps and Burnham Research Institutes in California in the area of drug discovery.

With its current client base, two leading universities and highly skilled workforce, the Life Sciences sector

in Northern Ireland is well placed to benefit from significant further strategic investment and growth.

Innovation Fund

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail how much money has been allocated to his department under the budget for the Innovation Fund; and what is his assessment of the adequacy of the Innovation fund.
(AQO 2508/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
Of the £90m funding allocated to innovation, £14.15m in total has been earmarked for DETI across the 3 year Budget period. This includes £7.45m for projects which will be delivered by the Department and £6.7m for projects which will be taken forward by Invest NI.

The funding has been allocated across 7 Departments to assist in improving research capacity, foster greater international collaboration, promote new and emerging technologies and stimulate research activity over the period of the comprehensive spending review

This additional funding is extremely welcome and fully complements the £220m from Priority 1 of the EU's 2007-2013 Competitiveness & Employment programme which focuses on Innovation & Research. It is a substantial and tangible recognition by the Executive of the important role that innovation can play in enhancing economic growth in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Energy Holdings

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment he has made in relation to the £3.5 million subsidy from Northern Ireland Energy Holdings.
(AQO 2507/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
The Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR) has provided DETI with an assessment of the performance of Northern Ireland Energy Holdings (NIEH) operations of the energy interconnectors.

For the past three years, the Moyle interconnector has had a deficit on operating costs but has not called on Northern Ireland Electricity customers to pay for this. Instead NIEH has used its reserves to fund the shortfall, which amounted to £3.5m in 2007/08; £9.4m in 2006/07 and £12.4m in 2005/06. Had NIEH not done so, customers would have had to pay for this through higher electricity charges.

Foreign Direct Investment Jobs

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of new

foreign direct investment jobs that were brought to the Upper Bann constituency, in the last three years; and (ii) the target over the next three years.

(AQO 2400/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Job creation in itself is not the prime focus of my Department's activity. The primary objective is to increase the level of productivity throughout Northern Ireland by strengthening business competitiveness, which in turn will lead to greater wealth creation and better employment opportunities for the whole community.

Between 1st April 2002 and 31st March 2007, Invest NI offered £17 million of assistance towards inward investment projects in the Upper Bann Parliamentary Constituency Area which plan to create 188 new jobs while safeguarding 2,108 existing jobs.

In addition, Invest NI offered £40 million of assistance towards projects undertaken by locally-owned clients, leveraging gross investment of £165 million. Although the agency does not record the number of jobs promoted by locally-owned clients, supporting its clients to grow and become more successful in export markets will inevitably lead to increased and improved employment opportunities in the area.

With regard to the next three years, my Department has not attributed inward investment job targets to specific geographical regions of Northern Ireland.

Invest NI's role is to promote the whole of Northern Ireland as a viable and attractive location for foreign companies to invest in. The Programme for Government indicates that it plans to promote 6,500 new inward investment jobs. The emphasis will be on promoting higher value-added jobs with a target of 5,500 of the total posts attracting salaries above the NI Private Sector Median

Corporate Plan 2008-2011

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail why the draft Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment Corporate Plan 2008-2011 has moved away from encouraging inward investment into areas of social need, towards a strategy that focuses more on job creation and higher wages.

(AQO 2433/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Both the draft DETI Corporate Plan 2008-11 and the draft Invest NI Corporate Plan 2008-11, which are closely aligned with the recently published Programme for Government include the target that 70% of new foreign direct investment projects secured will be located within 10 miles of an area of economic disadvantage.

This target sits alongside the other targets in relation to the salary levels of the 6,500 new jobs to be created by inward investment projects during 2008-2011. These targets have been set in the context of the Executive's goal to aim to halve the private sector productivity gap with the UK excluding the Greater South East by 2015

ENVIRONMENT

Derry/Londonderry Area Plan

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the land that is still available under the Derry/Londonderry Area Plan for economic and industrial use.

(AQW 4376/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster):

In February 2008, there were 154.66 hectares (381.99 acres) of industrial zoned land available for development within the City Council area in Londonderry. In addition, the Derry Area Plan 2011 identified a further 407.91 hectares (1007.53 acres) of Existing Industrial Land to be retained for employment purposes.

There are also two former Military of Defence sites located within the City Council area where some provision for mixed use economic development would be acceptable within the overall redevelopment in the future. The two sites are Ebrington (10.52ha) and Fort George (5.66ha).

Properties within Townlands

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment what action she is taking to amend the current legislation in relation to the numbering of individual properties within townlands.

(AQW 4380/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Whilst I share concerns regarding the retention of townlands and townland names, I am not persuaded that the numbering of individual properties within townlands provides a feasible or practicable way forward and therefore I do not propose to amend the current legislation.

I am aware that some councils, in recognition of the importance of townland names for local communities, have decided that all new signs bearing road names would also include the townland name printed underneath the name of the road, thereby encouraging the continued use of townland names. I believe that the adoption of such an approach by other councils would be preferable to the numbering of individual properties within townlands.

Illegal Dumping

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of cases of suspected illegal dumping, originating from the Republic of Ireland, that have occurred in the past 12 months; and (ii) the action she is taking to address this issue. (AQW 4381/08)

The Minister of the Environment:

(i) Since February 2007, there have been 12 prosecutions involving cases of illegal dumping where waste from the Republic of Ireland has been found. A further 3 cases are pending.

(ii) My officials are working closely with their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland, and I have recently written to the Irish Environment Minister, John Gormley, in order to progress repatriation of waste that has already been deposited. The Environmental Crime Team within the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) has developed close and effective working relationships with other enforcement agencies. It is forming a dedicated intelligence unit in order to target not just any complicit land owners but those driving this serious crime. EHS will be training further staff, in partnership with PSNI and Assets Recovery Agency, as Financial Intelligence Officers.

Waste Management

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to provide her assessment of the use of incineration as a form of waste management. (AQW 4424/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There is a wide range of proven and new technologies available to reduce the amount of waste sent to landfill, which includes thermal treatment. Thermal treatment in this context includes incineration and advanced thermal technologies such as pyrolysis and gasification which enable the recovery of energy from waste. The Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy published by my Department recognises that energy from waste will be a necessary component of the preferred infrastructure to ensure we meet our national and European obligations to divert waste from landfill. This can also contribute to our non-fossil fuel obligations and renewable energy policies, as well as providing diversity and security of energy supply.

North Down and Ards Area Plan

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm the estimated timescale for the declaration of the North Down and Ards Area Plan. (AQW 4431/08)

The Minister of the Environment: You have previously asked me about delays in connection with

the Ards Down Plan and it is assumed that you are referring to this Plan.

If that is the case then there is no change to my previous response on this subject.

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.

The delay in the PAC report will inevitably cause delay in the adoption process and it is impossible at this stage to provide a definitive date. Much will depend on the nature of the PAC report and the resultant work required by the Department as it considers its findings. It is still intended to publish the adopted Plan as early as possible following receipt of the report and resources have been set aside for that purpose.

Grouse Moors

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the financial assistance available to groups that wish to retain and upgrade grouse moors. (AQW 4433/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has not currently been asked to provide any financial assistance to retain and upgrade grouse moors. Any requests for such assistance would be considered by my officials in the context of existing Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) funding and the criteria set down in the Environment and Heritage Service's Natural Heritage Grants Programme.

The DARD Minister Michelle Gildernew, has advised me that farmers and landowners who participate in DARD's agri-environment schemes can receive payments for the positive management of heather moorland and degraded heath. These payments support management which restores heather moorland and will benefit red grouse where they occur.

Officials in DARD's Countryside Management Branch would be happy to provide you with details of the scheme options and payments that are available.

Planning Applications

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the funding that is available for each wind farm; and (ii) the number of planning applications that are in the planning process for wind farms (a) on land; and (b) at sea. (AQW 4439/08)

The Minister of the Environment: (i) There is no direct financial assistance given to individual wind-farms from DETI. The only support mechanism is via the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO). NIRO imposes a legal obligation on electricity suppliers to source a specified proportion of the electricity consumed in Northern Ireland from renewable sources such as wind. The amount of support any individual wind-farm will receive will depend on its output.

(ii)(a) Planning Service is currently processing 48 applications for windfarms on land.

(ii)(b) None. Off-shore wind development does not fall within the jurisdiction of Planning Service.

Rose Energy

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her plans to hold a public enquiry/ consultation into the planning application for an incinerator in the banks of Lough Neagh proposed by Rose Energy. (AQW 4636/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Rose Energy has not yet submitted a planning application. I have no plans at present to hold a public enquiry / consultation into the planning application. Planning Service will process any future planning application in accordance with the provisions set out in legislation.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Meeting Requests

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of meeting requests he has received since May 2007. (AQW 4098/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): Since May 2007 I have received 179 meeting requests in my capacity as Minister for Finance and Personnel. This figure doesn't include press interviews, meetings of the Executive and Executive Sub-committees, speaking events, dinners, receptions or my series of bilateral meetings with Ministerial colleagues prior to Executive agreement of the budget.

Civil Servants

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of civil servants who are currently seeking transfer to a post in Derry/ Londonderry. (AQW 4641/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of civil servants who are currently seeking transfer to a post in Londonderry is 823.

Rates Payments

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of (i) the expected arrears of rates payments by the end of this financial year; and (ii) the effect of this on government finances; and to detail (a) the steps he is taking to address this situation; (b) when he expects the arrears figure to come back to a manageable level; and (c) the action his department is taking to prevent the amount of debt written-off from increasing due to the delay in collecting rates. (AQW 4642/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The forecast level of rate arrears at 31 March 2008 is expected to be around £130m. This includes some £41m outstanding from 31 March 2007.

The level of rates revenue built into budget plans is based on historic collection levels. Any differences that might arise between what is expected and what has been collected in a given year have been relatively small, and thus have been accommodated within Departmental underspends and reduced requirements, rather than impacting on the level of planned public service provision. Where rates are collected later than originally anticipated, they contribute to the Executive's spending power at that point. As a result, there has been no impact on expenditure plans.

All rate arrears due will be included on rate bills for 2008/2009 and, in the absence of an agreement from the ratepayer to pay, Land and Property Services will start legal proceedings in June 2008 to recover outstanding rating debt. Following the award of a decree in the Magistrates Court, Land and Property Services will work with the Enforcement of Judgements Office to pursue the payment of the debt using all available enforcement methods.

The level of rate arrears is expected to reduce considerably over the next 12 months.

Rating debt is written off only after all available collection methods have been exhausted.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Health and Social Care Trust Employees

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of

Health and Social Care Trust employees currently employed in the Strabane District Council area.

(AQW 4364/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Strabane District Council area is located within the Western Health & Social Care Trust. There are a total of 9,154 staff (8,108 whole-time equivalent), excluding bank staff and home helps, employed by this Trust who will provide services throughout the entire Trust area including to the population of Strabane District Council. Of these, 419 staff (201 whole-time equivalent) are employed in facilities located specifically within the council boundary.

Notes: 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.

Addiction Services

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his plans to address drug and alcohol addiction services both at statutory level and at community level; and to confirm the action she is taking to provide funding to community based projects in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area, in the incoming financial year.

(AQW 4392/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A wide range of alcohol and drug addiction services are provided across Northern Ireland by both statutory and community/voluntary organisation, including services operated by the Western Health and Social Care Trust and by organisations such as Northlands. These services are commissioned by the relevant Health and Social Services Board based on a local analysis of need. It is anticipated that this commissioned process will continue, ensuring that local addiction services are provided in a range of settings at a local level.

In respect of community based projects in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area, the Western Drug and Alcohol Co-ordination Team (WDACT) received £822,434 in financial year 2007/08 to deliver on the outcomes contained in its local action plan. This action plan was developed in order to meet local need, and in support of the outcomes contained in the regional New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs. WDACT issued tenders for the services required in that area, and all local organisations were able to bid to provide these services. Though this process, funding has been provided to a range of local community organisations including the DIVERT project, the E Go Project, and the Hurt project. In addition, WDACT operates a short term small grant funding scheme each year, and again local community/voluntary organisations have the opportunity to bid for

this funding. It is anticipated that WDACT will receive a similar amount of funding in 2008/2009.

Drug Misuse

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the action taken by his department to identify the extent of drug misuse in the South Down constituency; and (ii) the plans his department has to address the issue. (AQW 4407/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: (i) The Department commissions a number of prevalence surveys that 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 Southern Drug and Alcohol Co-Ordination Team (SDACT), which is funded by the Department, assesses local need when developing initiatives and targeting resources within the Southern Health and Social Services Board (SHSSB) area, including South Down.

(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 Actions 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 SDACT a number of programmes, projects and initiatives have been developed and put in place that cover the South Down area. A similar level of funding will be available in to SDACT for financial year 2008/09.

Pregnancy Termination

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the criteria used to record the reason for a pregnancy termination as ‘foetal disability’. (AQW 4417/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is unlawful to perform any operation in Northern Ireland for the termination of a pregnancy for reasons of foetal disability. It is only lawful to terminate a pregnancy in the case of actual or possible foetal disability if the continuance of the pregnancy threatens the life of the mother, or would adversely affect her physical or mental health.

Whilst information is collected on the number of abortions carried out in Northern Ireland information relating to the reason for abortion is not collected.

Pregnancy Termination

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how the statistics for termination of pregnancy for reasons of foetal disability are recorded across the Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 4419/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is unlawful to perform any operation in Northern Ireland for the termination of a pregnancy for reasons of foetal disability. It is only lawful to terminate a pregnancy in the case of actual or possible foetal disability if the continuance of the pregnancy threatens the life of the mother, or would adversely affect her physical or mental health.

Whilst information is collected on the number of abortions carried out in Northern Ireland information relating to the reason for abortion is not collected.

Mourneside Health Centre

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a timescale for the installation of automatic sliding doors at the Mourneside Health Centre in Strabane in order to alleviate access difficulties for people with physical disabilities, the elderly and the infirm. (AQW 4421/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This is a privately owned and occupied Health Care Facility and as such the owners are responsible for ensuring full compliance with all statutory standards, including DDA compliance.

However, I understand that tenders have been received for the installation of the automatic sliding doors at the

facility and work should be completed after the Easter Holiday period.

Refused Operations

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients who have been refused operations at Lagan Valley Hospital due to (i) age; (ii) obesity; (iii) smoking; and (iv) level of alcohol consumption. (AQW 4437/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested on the number of patients who have been refused an operation and the reason for refusal at Lagan Valley Hospital is not available.

Lagan Valley Hospital

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for each of the last 5 years (i) the number of births in Lagan Valley Hospital; (ii) the percentage this represented of all births; (iii) the number of caesarean sections in Lagan Valley Hospital; and (iv) the percentage of births this represented in Lagan Valley Hospital; and to outline how these figures compare with other maternity units. (AQW 4438/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of births and percentage of births in Northern Ireland that occurred at Lagan Valley Hospital is provided in the table below.

Year	Number of Births at Lagan Valley Hospital	Percentage of N.I. births occurring at Lagan Valley
2002-03	1,139	5.2%
2003-04	1,226	5.9%
2004-05	1,157	5.5%
2005-06	1,177	5.2%
2006-07	1,174	4.6%

Source: Child Health System.

Year	Number of Caesarean Section Births	Percentage of Births delivered by Caesarean Section
2002-03	261	22.9%
2003-04	290	22.6%
2004-05	224	19.4%
2005-06	195	16.6%
2006-07	176	15.0%

Source: Child Health System..

Of all births in Lagan Valley Hospital for 2006-07, 15.0% were delivered by caesarean section. This is the lowest rate of caesarean sections in Northern Ireland for 2006-07.

Babies Born Prematurely

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of babies born prematurely, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust, in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 4446/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of babies born prematurely, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust is shown in the table below for the last 5 years for which figures are available.

Trust ² of Birth	Number of Babies born Prematurely ¹				
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Western Trust	219	281	265	263	293
Northern Trust	260	256	276	312	312
Southern Trust	296	311	347	392	426
Belfast Trust	563	529	531	501	507
South Eastern Trust	232	229	204	247	264
Total	1,570	1,606	1,623	1,715	1,802

Source: Child Health System

Notes: ¹ A premature birth has been defined as a birth of less than 37 weeks gestation.

² Figures have been presented in terms of New Trusts introduced with effect from April 2007. The figures are collected in terms of Legacy Trust and the information presented here is an amalgamation of Legacy Trust figures..

Firefighters' Pensions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2675/08, to detail the number of fire-fighters who received pensions pay-outs based on misinterpretation of commutations regulations before the error was discovered; and to detail the total cost incurred.

(AQW 4452/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can confirm that 15 firefighters received pension payouts based on the misinterpretation prior to the error being discovered when the 16th firefighter's payout was calculated.

As previously stated in responses to AQW 2675/08 and AQW 3081/08 it is not possible to determine if any actual loss is to be incurred in the long term. This is because commutation calculations are based on tables of life expectancy provided by the Government Actuarial Department (GAD). Costs will therefore depend on the actual lifespan of each of the individuals affected.

Respite Care Needs

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the help available through his department to people with learning disabilities and their carers, generally, and in particular, to people aged 50 or over who have a learning disability and whose carer is elderly or has passed away; and to further detail the facilities that are in place to address the growing respite care needs of elderly people with disabilities.

(AQW 4455/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A wide range of help is available to people of all ages with learning disabilities and their carers through provision of specialised care. This care can take place in learning disability hospitals, care in the community, transitions services, day care and supported employment.

Respite care is an important component of health and social care services provided in response to assessed care needs. Such care takes many different forms and may be provided to meet the user's own needs or the needs of carers/families. As a result of the budget outcome, over the next three years I will be providing an additional 200 new or enhanced respite packages for people with learning difficulties and their carers/families.

Respite care is allocated on a compatibility basis rather than by specific age bands. However, where possible, age alignment takes place when respite is being planned.

Depending on the individual circumstances a range of social security benefits is also available to people with learning disabilities and their carers

Masters Degrees in Social Work

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not he is planning to fund students studying for Masters degrees in Social Work at universities in Great Britain.

(AQW 4474/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This Department administers a student incentive scheme to support students domiciled in Northern Ireland to study for the Honours Degree in

Social Work here. There are no plans to provide funding for students from Northern Ireland who chose to study for a Masters Degree in Social Work at universities in Great Britain.

Ophthalmic Services

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total cost of ophthalmic services in each of the last two years.
(AQW 4535/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer Mr Simpson to AQW 281/08 in which he asked me to detail the total spend for Ophthalmic Services for each of the last three years. The total spend on General Ophthalmic Services for each of the last two years was:

2005/06	£15,867,844.74
2006/07	£16,279,840.66

The figure for the total spend for 2007/08 is not yet available.

Superbug Fatalities

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what percentages of cases of (i) Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA) infection; and (ii) Clostridium difficile, resulted in fatalities in each of the last three years.
(AQW 4536/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Without a specialised linkage study it is not possible, using existing data sources, to state what percentage of MRSA and Clostridium difficile cases have resulted in fatalities. The Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre does not have names for all the MRSA and Clostridium difficile cases reported and therefore cannot make a link to those with MRSA and Clostridium difficile on their death certificate.

NHS Demographics

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the percentages of (i) General Practitioners; (ii) dentists; (iii) optometrists; and (iv) pharmacists, that were (a) male; and (b) female, and aged (i) under 40 years of age; (ii) between 40 and 55 years of age; and (iii) over 55 years of age, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 4537/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the tables below.

(I) PERCENTAGE OF GPs BY AGE AND GENDER 2005 - 2007

2005

	Age			
	All Ages	Under 40	40 to 55	Over 55
Female	36.1%	12.4%	21.0%	2.8%
Male	63.9%	11.1%	39.3%	13.5%
Total	100.0%	23.5%	60.3%	16.2%

2006

	Age			
	All Ages	Under 40	40 to 55	Over 55
Female	36.7%	12.2%	22.1%	2.4%
Male	63.3%	11.5%	38.0%	13.8%
Total	100.0%	23.7%	60.1%	16.1%

2007

	Age			
	All Ages	Under 40	40 to 55	Over 55
Female	37.9%	12.5%	22.6%	2.8%
Male	62.1%	11.8%	36.7%	13.6%
Total	100.0%	24.3%	59.4%	16.3%

Source: Central Services Agency

Notes: Percentages may not sum due to rounding.

Figures refer to Unrestricted Principals.

(II) PERCENTAGE OF DENTISTS BY AGE AND GENDER 2005 - 2007

2005

	Age			
	All Ages	Under 40	40 to 55	Over 55
Female	43.5%	31.6%	11.4%	0.4%
Male	56.5%	25.3%	25.1%	6.1%
Total	100.0%	56.9%	36.6%	6.5%

2006

	Age			
	All Ages	Under 40	40 to 55	Over 55
Female	44.3%	31.5%	12.4%	0.4%
Male	55.7%	24.8%	25.2%	5.6%
Total	100.0%	56.3%	37.6%	6.0%

2007

	Age			
	All Ages	Under 40	40 to 55	Over 55
Female	45.8%	32.8%	12.5%	0.5%
Male	54.2%	24.0%	25.9%	4.3%
Total	100.0%	56.9%	38.4%	4.8%

Source: Central Services Agency

Notes: Percentages may not sum due to rounding.

Figures refer to Principal Dentists working in General Dental Services; the figures exclude assistants and Vocational Dental Practitioners. The figures also exclude those working in the Community Dental Service and hospital dentists.

(III) PERCENTAGE OF OPTOMETRISTS BY GENDER 2005 - 2007

	All Ages*		
	2005	2006	2007
Female	53.9%	57.2%	57.1%
Male	46.1%	42.8%	42.9%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

* Age is not available for Optometrists

Source: Central Services Agency

Notes: Percentages may not sum due to rounding.

Figures exclude ophthalmic medical practitioners and dispensing opticians

Health Staff Numbers

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (i) General Practitioners; (ii) dentists; (iii) optometrists; and (iv) pharmacists, (a) in total; and (b) per 100,000 residents, in each of the last three years. (AQW 4538/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the tables below.

(I) NUMBER OF GPS PER 100,000 RESIDENTS 2005 – 2007

Year	Total number of GPs	GPs per 100,000 residents
2005	1,090	63
2006	1,104	63
2007	1,127	65

Source: Central Services Agency

Notes: Figures refer to Unrestricted Principals only.

(II) NUMBER OF DENTISTS PER 100,000 RESIDENTS 2005 – 2007

Year	Total number of dentists	Dentists per 100,000 residents
2005	752	44
2006	765	44

Year	Total number of dentists	Dentists per 100,000 residents
2007	795	46

Source: Central Services Agency

Notes: Figures refer to Principal Dentists working in General Dental Services; the figures exclude assistants and Vocational Dental Practitioners. The figures also exclude those working in the Community Dental Service and hospital dentists.

(III) NUMBER OF OPTOMETRISTS PER 100,000 RESIDENTS 2005 – 2007

Year	Total number of optometrists	Optometrists per 100,000 residents
2005	516	30
2006	549	32
2007	567	33

Source: Central Services Agency

Notes: Figures exclude ophthalmic medical practitioners and dispensing opticians.

(IV) NUMBER OF PHARMACISTS PER 100,000 RESIDENTS 2005 – 2007

Year	Total number of pharmacists	Pharmacists per 100,000 residents
2005	1962	114
2006	1906	109
2007	1983	114

Source: Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland

Notes: Figures refer to all pharmacists on the register of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland; including community pharmacists but also locums and those working in hospital, academia and administrative roles and a small number not practising, e.g. retired..

Health Staff Numbers

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (i) General Practitioner practices; (ii) dental practices; (iii) ophthalmic practices; and (iv) pharmacies, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4539/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

The information requested is provided in the tables below.

(I) NUMBER OF GP PRACTICES

Year	Number Of Practices
2003	#
2004	365
2005	365

Year	Number Of Practices
2006	363
2007	362

December 2003 data is not available

Source: Central Services Agency

(II) NUMBER OF DENTAL PRACTICES

Year	Number Of Practices
2003	#
2004	369
2005	376
2006	362
2007	358

December 2003 data is not available

Source: Central Services Agency

(III) NUMBER OF OPHTHALMIC PRACTICES

Year	Number Of Practices
2003	230
2004	233
2005	244
2006	248
2007	249

Source: Central Services Agency

(IV) NUMBER OF PHARMACIES

Year	Number Of Pharmacies
2003	510
2004	511
2005	513
2006	515
2007	518

Source: Central Services Agency

Mental-Health Support

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will consider publishing a directory of mental health support services for children and young people. (AQW 4540/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has no plans to publish a directory of mental health services for children and young people. It would be the responsibility of the HSS Boards, working with the HSC Trusts and all the other

bodies and groups providing services in this area, to create and maintain a services directory.

Mental-Health Support

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount and proportion of the Budget which has been assigned to mental health services; and what proportion is expected to be spent on children and young people. (AQW 4541/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Funding for mental health services represents around 7% of the total HSC spend. 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. It will be for the individual Boards to determine how much funding is allocated to child and adolescent mental health services.

Mental-Health Support

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will undertake a consultation process to explore our collective role as a community towards support for children and young people's mental health. (AQW 4543/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As part of the Bamford Review a number of recommendations were produced in its report "A Vision of a Comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service" which outlined the way forward for Mental Health services for children and young people. Bamford consulted extensively with relevant stakeholders including service users, carers, professionals and voluntary and community groups. My Department is currently in the process of developing its response to this report and, once this has been finalised, it will be subject to a 3 month public consultation. I have no other plans for consultation.

Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (i) acute beds; and (ii) non-acute beds, currently at Tyrone and Fermanagh hospital. (AQW 4552/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of acute and non-acute beds in Tyrone and Fermanagh hospital, as at 3rd March 2008, is outlined in the table below.

Hospital	Number of Acute Beds	Number of Non- Acute Beds	Total Number of Beds
Tyrone and Fermanagh	0	81	81

Source: Western Health and Social Care Trust

Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to clarify whether or not the number of acute admission beds for under-65's are to be reduced at the Tyrone and Fermanagh hospital. (AQW 4553/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Western Health and Social Care Trust advises that a planned development of community mental health services, in line with the Bamford Review, will provide a much more appropriate response in time of crisis and will reduce the need for acute beds. Over the next three years a planned reduction of 28 beds is envisaged.

Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to clarify whether or not the number of beds at the Tyrone and Fermanagh hospital are to be reduced. (AQW 4554/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Western Health and Social Care Trust advises that a planned development of community mental health services, in line with the Bamford Review, will provide a much more appropriate response in time of crisis and will reduce the need for acute beds. Over the next three years a planned reduction of 28 beds is envisaged.

Tooth Extractions

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of general anaesthetics carried out for tooth extractions, broken down by age group (including children aged under 16); (ii) the total number of teeth extracted; and (iii) the cost of providing this service, over the last 12 months. (AQW 4559/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of general anaesthetics undertaken for dental extractions is only collected centrally for children aged 13, and under

For the year January to December 2007:

- 5956 children aged 13, and under, received general anaesthesia for a dental extraction
- 4080 permanent teeth were extracted
- 25199 deciduous (baby) teeth were extracted
- This gives a total of 29279 teeth extracted from children aged 13, and under

Information on the costs of general anaesthetics provided for dental extractions is not collected centrally, nor is it readily available, and can only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Clostridium Difficile

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of Clostridium difficile cases that (i) have been diagnosed; (ii) have resulted in death; (iii) are still being treated; and (iv) have been cured, in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 4569/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The figures are collated and validated by the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre.

Figures for the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust area are as follows.

(i) Mandatory surveillance for Clostridium difficile began in 2005, with 2006 being the first complete calendar year that all laboratories used the same methods. Mandatory surveillance is currently restricted to persons aged 65 years and over. The number of cases diagnosed is as follows:

Year	2005	2006	2007	2008 1 Jan – 15 Feb
No. of cases	235	252	219	26*

* This figure is interim and has not been validated by the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre

(ii) The number of people whose death certificate mentioned Clostridium difficile and who lived in the Trust area is as follows:

Year	2005	2006	2007	2008 1 Jan – 29 Feb
No. of deaths	10	18	7	4

(iii) At 6 March 2008, 6 patients were being treated for Clostridium difficile.

It is not possible to provide figures for part (iv) of this question as information is not collected in this form.

Carers

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area on waiting lists, following assessment, for home-helps and carers provision. (AQW 4572/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of patients on waiting lists, following assessment, for carers provision is not collected centrally. Information is, however, collected on the number of adults who were assessed as requiring or who were on a waiting list for home help or other domiciliary care in the community, where their assessed needs have not been delivered.

On 31st December 2007, 464 people in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust were waiting for home help or other domiciliary services. The table below provides a detailed breakdown of the length of time waiting and the main reasons why home help or other domiciliary services could not be provided.

Length of Time Waiting ¹	Waiting for Home Help or other Domiciliary Services due to a Lack of Domiciliary Care providers	Waiting for Home Help or other Domiciliary Services due to a lack of funding
Less than 1 month	10	49
1 month < 3 months	40	99
3 months < 6 months	11	93
6 months < 12 months	21	96
12 months or more	13	32
Total	95	369

Source: DHSSPS Information return Adult Unmet Needs.

- 1 The length of time waiting refers to the length of time between the need for this type of service being identified for the client by the Trust and the end of the quarter.

Carers

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of people employed as home-helps and carers, and (ii) the number required to meet the assessed needs of patients. (AQW 4573/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and Social Care Trusts currently directly employ 5,991 home helps although many of these will be working on a part-time basis. Information is not centrally available about the number of home help and carers employed by independent

sector organisations, with whom Trusts contract to provide care at home.

Staff complements are established on the basis of prioritised need and available resources. Due to the level of demand for these services, Trusts maintain rolling programmes of recruitment. Consequently, the number of vacancies at any point in time varies. Trusts estimate that, currently, there are 124 vacancies for home helps and carers within Trusts. Figures for the independent sector are not available.

Organ Transplant List

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people (i) who are currently on the organ transplant list; and (ii) who donated organs in 2007.

(AQW 4580/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In February 2008 there were 319 Northern Ireland residents on the waiting list for solid organ transplants. During 2007 there were organ donations from 33 cadaveric donors and 9 live donors in Northern Ireland.

Dog Bites

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people treated in (i) Accident and Emergency units; (ii) Minor Injuries units; and (iii) GP surgeries, for injuries sustained as a result of dog bites, in each of the past five years. (AQW 4593/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of people treated in (i) Accident and Emergency units; (ii) Minor Injuries units; and (iii) GP surgeries, for injuries sustained as a result of dog bites, in each of the past five years is not available.

The number of people admitted as inpatients to hospitals in Northern Ireland, in each of the last five years with a diagnosis related to a dog bite, is available and is shown in the table below.

Year	2006/07	2005/06	2004/05	2003/04	2002/03
Individuals	49	63	66	71	65

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (i) the availability of a lead agency responsible for ensuring that families

have access to an assessment diagnostic and treatment service for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD); and (ii) the availability of specific funding to provide accessible services to this group.

(AQW 4599/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is currently no single agency leading on the availability of assessment and treatment services for ADHD as these services are provided by each individual Health and Social Care Board and Trust based on the needs of the populations they serve. There is no ring-fenced funding stream for ADHD services.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the services accessible to (i) children of primary school age; (ii) adolescents; and (iii) adults living in North and West Belfast who require assessment, diagnosis and treatment for the condition of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

(AQW 4600/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is no information available on services available specific to North and West Belfast. However, within the Belfast Trust which is responsible for this area, the condition of ADHD in school age children/adolescents is assessed, diagnosed, and treated by CAMHS services at Tiers 2, 3 and 4. This includes Community Paediatrics/Young Persons Centre services and the Child and Family Clinic. The condition requires multi-disciplinary assessment and multi-agency liaison.

Within the Belfast Trust's CAMHS service Tier 3 (which is a specialist multi-disciplinary service assessing and treating severe complex conditions), ADHD is now usually assessed and diagnosed alongside other co-morbid conditions (two or more conditions occurring simultaneously in the same person).

There are currently no dedicated services for assessment and treatment of ADHD in adolescents apart from co-morbid cases.

There are currently no dedicated services for the assessment and treatment of ADHD beyond 18 years of age.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the transition arrangements for young people diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder who are receiving

medication when they reach 18 years of age.

(AQW 4601/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Different arrangements apply in different Board areas and include referral to an Adult Psychiatrist or retention on paediatric services for a limited period

The Bamford Review has recommended clearer referral pathways and guidelines for the assessment and treatment of ADHD.

Incontinence Appliances

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to introduce proposals similar to those in Great Britain, in relation to the provision of stoma and incontinence appliances; and what is his assessment of the impact these proposals will have on (i) patients who obtain these services in their own homes; and (ii) the companies that provide home deliveries for these patients.

(AQW 4604/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are no plans to amend the processes currently in place.

Stoma and incontinence appliances can be dispensed by pharmacy contractors, dispensing doctors and dispensing appliance contractors and the current arrangements have been in place in Northern Ireland for a number of years.

A consultation process has been ongoing in England since 2003 in relation to future arrangements for the provision of stoma and incontinence products there. My Department will continue to monitor developments in England before considering its position in relation to the provision of incontinence and stoma care appliances. Patients in Northern Ireland can still choose to source their products and services locally or from suppliers elsewhere in the UK.

Incontinence Appliances

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the current provision of stoma and incontinence products.

(AQW 4606/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Stoma and incontinence appliances can be dispensed by pharmacy contractors, dispensing doctors and dispensing appliance contractors and the current arrangements have been in place in Northern Ireland for a number of years.

A consultation process has been ongoing in England since 2003 in relation to future arrangements for the provision of stoma and incontinence products there. My Department will continue to monitor developments in England before considering its position in relation to the provision of incontinence and stoma care appliances. Patients in Northern Ireland can still choose to source their products and services locally or from suppliers elsewhere in the UK.

Incontinence Appliances

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of proposals made by the Department of Health to amend arrangements for the provision of stoma and incontinence appliances. (AQW 4609/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health in London consulted in 2007 on proposals to review the arrangements for payment for the provision of stoma and incontinence appliances and related services to Primary Care. The proposed changes will apply to England only and do not extend to Northern Ireland.

My Department will monitor developments in England before considering its position in relation to the provision of incontinence and stoma care appliances. Patients in Northern Ireland can still choose to source their products and services locally or from suppliers elsewhere in the UK.

National No Smoking Day

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the action his department is taking (i) to promote and contribute to National No Smoking Day on 12 March 2008; and (ii) to warn young people of the dangers of smoking. (AQW 4621/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Health Promotion Agency promotes this UK-wide annual event in Northern Ireland on behalf of my Department. It does so in collaboration with other interested organisations such as the Ulster Cancer Foundation, which chairs the Northern Ireland Committee. The Agency part funds the local briefing day aimed at health professionals, the voluntary sector and others. The primary aim is to encourage smokers to quit by raising public awareness about the health risks through various local initiatives, as well as through press releases, poster displays and leaflet drops.

Young people are one of three key targets groups in my Department's Five Year Tobacco Action Plan which will be reviewed later in the year. We continue

to work with the Health Promotion Agency and others to discourage the young from smoking through a range of initiatives, including public information campaigns and the Agency's website: www.up-to-you.net which aims to educate young people about the dangers. In addition, partnership working through the health promoting schools network continues to address smoking as well as other lifestyle issues. The Ulster Cancer Foundation's Smokebusters initiative, aimed at 9-11 year olds as they approach the end of primary education, also informs children about the health risks associated with smoking.

Public Meetings

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (i) public meetings that took place in (a) Fermanagh and South Tyrone; and (b) West Tyrone, constituencies; and (ii) the number of people that attended these meetings, in the last 6 months, in relation to a proposed Midwifery Led Unit in Omagh. (AQW 4622/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Western Health and Social Services Board commissioned the community networks in Strabane, Omagh and Fermanagh to advertise, organise and facilitate user workshop events to inform the feasibility study on a proposed Community Midwifery Unit in Omagh.

Three public events took place as detailed below:

Date	Constituency	Numbers Attending
5 November 2007	West Tyrone (Newtownstewart)	14
5 November 2007	West Tyrone (Omagh)	In excess of 40
6 November 2007	Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Irvinestown)	Approximately 8

Staff Overpay

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3968/08, to detail the reasons for a greater number of staff being subject to a claw back of money overpaid to them, rather than facing a reduction in their current level of pay. (AQW 4640/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Pay protection and claw back of excess payments are two very separate issues and are dealt with under very different arrangements. Pay protection is provided for within the under Agenda for

Change arrangements and is available to an individual when the appropriate Agenda for Change rate of pay is less than the salary in payment to that individual at 1 April 2005. The claw back of an excess payment from public funding is dealt with under the Government Accounting Northern Ireland guidance. This requires Health and Social Care employers to seek to recoup any excess payment from the public purse. There is no correlation in the number of staff being subjected to either of these arrangements.

Service Frameworks

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the service frameworks developed by his department. (AQW 4645/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department is currently developing the first round of service frameworks: cardiovascular health and wellbeing;

- respiratory health and wellbeing;
- cancer prevention, treatment and care;
- mental health and wellbeing; and
- learning disability.

It is anticipated that the first of these service frameworks - cardiovascular health and wellbeing framework will be launched in autumn 2008.

The next stage of the work programme is to identify further priority areas for service framework development, for commencement in 2008. The Boards, in collaboration with Trusts and local interest groups, have submitted a list of regional priorities for future service framework development. These proposals are currently under evaluation and a decision regarding the next round of service frameworks will be taken by the end of March 2008.

On-Call Laboratory Service

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm if he is planning to stop the on-call laboratory service at Tyrone County Hospital. (AQW 4661/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are no plans to stop the on-call service provided by the laboratory at Tyrone County Hospital.

Minor Injury Unit, Ards Hospital

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of

patients treated at the minor injury unit at Ards Hospital, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 4666/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of attendances at the Minor Injury Unit at Ards Hospital, for each of the last five financial years, is shown in the table below.

Year	First Attendances ¹	Follow Up Attendances ²	Total Attendances
2002-2003	7,203	1,259	8,462
2003-2004	7,764	1,556	9,320
2004-2005	7,983	1,361	9,344
2005-2006	8,581	1,443	10,024
2006-2007	8,971	1,231	10,202

Source: Departmental Return KH09 (Part 2)

- 1 – A first attendance is the first of a series or the only attendance at a department for accident and emergency services or at a Minor Injury Unit in the hospital.
- 2 – A follow –up attendance is any subsequent attendance for the same condition at the same accident and emergency department or Minor Injury Unit in the hospital.

Accident and Emergency Unit, Ulster Hospital

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients treated at the accident and emergency unit at the Ulster Hospital, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 4667/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of attendances at the Accident and Emergency Department at the Ulster Hospital, for each of the last five financial years, is shown in the table below.

Year	First Attendances ¹	Follow Up Attendances ²	Total Attendances
2002-2003	54,118	5,129	59,247
2003-2004	54,659	4,172	58,831
2004-2005	54,820	4,188	59,008
2005-2006	59,145	3,654	62,799
2006-2007	63,195	3,545	66,740

Source: Departmental Return KH09 (Part 2)

- 1 – A first attendance is the first of a series or the only attendance at a department for accident and emergency services or at a Minor Injury Unit in the hospital.
- 2 – A follow –up attendance is any subsequent attendance for the same condition at the same accident and emergency department or Minor Injury Unit in the hospital..

Minor Injury Unit, Bangor Hospital

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients treated at the minor injury unit at Bangor Hospital, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 4668/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of attendances at the Minor Injury Unit at Bangor Hospital, for each of the last five financial years, is shown in the table below.

Year	First Attendances ¹	Follow Up Attendances ²	Total Attendances
2002-2003	8,193	1,563	9,756
2003-2004	8,951	1,734	10,685
2004-2005	9,958	2,341	12,299
2005-2006	10,590	2,397	12,987
2006-2007	11,099	1,869	12,968

Source: Departmental Return KH09 (Part 2)

- 1 – A first attendance is the first of a series or the only attendance at a department for accident and emergency services or at a Minor Injury Unit in the hospital.
- 2 – A follow –up attendance is any subsequent attendance for the same condition at the same accident and emergency department or Minor Injury Unit in the hospital..

Accident and Emergency Unit, Ulster Hospital

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the capacity of the accident and emergency unit at the Ulster Hospital. (AQW 4669/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust have advised that the capacity of the Ulster Hospital accident and emergency department is as follows.

The department is structured into 5 different clinical areas, namely:

- **RATU (Rapid Assessment & Treatment Unit)** – which has 8 trolley spaces and 3 non trolley spaces, (one eye examination area, one children's consultation room and one ENP (emergency nurse practitioner) room, which is additional to the service provided in the minors area;
- **Resuscitation Area** – 10 trolley spaces plus one isolation room which can hold a bed;
- **Majors Area** – the majors area has 8 individual trolley spaces and one secure room;
- **Minors Area** – there is a separate minors area with 4 trolley spaces and 2 non trolley. This area

provides an Emergency Nurse Practitioner Service dedicated to the rapid assessment and treatment of those patients presenting with minor injuries/illness;

- In addition to the above, there is a 10 bedded observation ward with a further 4 recliner chair spaces.

The Majors Area is largely unutilised at present, as patients are streamed to the RATU, Resuscitation or Minors area, but is used as an overflow facility.

Press Officers

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of press officers employed by his department.

(AQW 4676/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are currently seven Press Officers employed within the department, who provide support to the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and departmental officials on core press office activity.

Self-Harm Service

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to provide future funding to the North and West Belfast self-harm service. (AQW 4692/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The North and West Belfast Self-Harm Service is one of a number of local projects funded through DSD's Renewing Communities Initiative. The support to these groups was time-limited and expires on 31 March 2008.

My Department can only fund projects which operate on a regional basis within Northern Ireland. Support for local projects such as the Self-Harm Service is a matter for the Health and Social Services Boards and the Health and Social Care Trusts.

Number of Births

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an estimate of the number of births that can be accommodated annually at (i) the Mater Maternity Unit; (ii) the Royal Maternity Unit; (iii) the Ulster Maternity Unit; and (iv) the Craigavon Maternity Unit, for each of the next 3 years. (AQW 4724/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: An estimate of the number of births

which can be accommodated annually at the Mater Maternity Unit, Royal Maternity Unit and Ulster Maternity Unit for the next three years is unavailable.

The estimate of the number of births that can be accommodated annually at Craigavon Maternity Unit is given in the table below.

Financial Year	Estimated number of Deliveries
2008/2009	3,800
2009/2010	4,000
2010/2011	4,200

Note: The figures for 2009/10 and 2010/11 are premised on the Southern HSC Trust's proposals to develop additional capacity at Craigavon Area Hospital and Daisy Hill Hospital in order to accommodate any increase in the number of births including the prospect of closure of Lagan Valley Maternity Unit.

The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust has advised that should additional staff be made available and antenatal care is delivered locally, there is capacity for approximately 400 additional births above current numbers. Child Health figures indicate that there were 1,174 births in the Mater Maternity Unit in 2007.

The Belfast HSC Trust also advise that should capital investment be provided to convert existing accommodation into delivery suite rooms, an additional 800 women above the current number would be delivered in the Royal Maternity Unit.

The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust advise that the Ulster Hospital Maternity Unit is heading to an outturn in the region of 3,300 deliveries as at 31/03/2008 and this is anticipated to increase to 3,500 in the coming financial year. However should additional resources, in terms of midwifery, clerical staff and support staff be provided, then it is possible to increase the capacity to 4,000.

Delayed Discharges, Whiteabbey Hospital

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of delayed discharges from Whiteabbey Hospital since May 2007. (AQW 4767/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of delayed discharges from Whiteabbey Hospital since May 2007 is given in the table below. 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 last day of each month from May 2007 until January 2008 (the last month for which information is available).

Month	Number of Delayed Discharges at end of each Month*
May 2007	17
June 2007	21
July 2007	15
August 2007	19
September 2007	17
October 2007	17
November 2007	13
December 2007	8
January 2008	17

Source: Departmental Return, DD1.

Notes: * - Information is currently provisional and subject to change.

Newspaper Expenditure

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his department's expenditure on (i) newspapers; (ii) magazines; and (iii) periodicals, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4794/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Expenditure on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in each of the last 3 years is shown in the table below. As spending on newspapers and magazines is accounted for within the same account code, it is not possible to show separate information for each.

Year	Newspapers and Magazines	Periodicals
2005/06	£6,012	£18,020
2006/07	£5,852	£17,037
2007/08 (to date)	£6,950	£14,906

Assembly Questions

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of written and oral Assembly questions that have been tabled to his department in the 6 months following the restoration of devolution; and (ii) the cost incurred in researching and answering these questions. (AQW 4800/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) Between 8 May and 8 November 2007, 430 written and 60 oral Assembly Questions were

tabled to the Department for Health Social Services and Public Safety.

- (ii) The preparation of answers to Assembly Questions forms an intrinsic part of the responsibilities of civil servants and consequently details of costs incurred in researching and answering questions are not separately calculated.

Rape Crisis Centre

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2258/08, to confirm (i) if his department has received the documentation in relation to accounting requirements from the Rape Crisis Centre in Belfast; and (ii) if his department will fund the Rape Crisis Centre in Belfast. (AQW 4985/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS)

(i) has not received documentation from the Rape Crisis Centre in Belfast in relation to accounting requirements. As the department does not fund the Rape Crisis Centre there is no need for any such documentation to be submitted to the department.

(ii) The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is not in a position to fund the Rape Crisis Centre in Belfast. Services for victims of sexual violence and abuse are being taken forward through the implementation of the Sexual Violence and Abuse Regional Strategy which will be issued shortly. As part of the Regional Strategy, a new Sexual Assault Referral Centre will be set up in Northern Ireland to provide holistic services for victims of rape and sexual assault.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) all the current contracts that have been entered into by Northern Ireland Water that involve the use of consultants; and (ii) the estimated value of these contracts. (AQW 4203/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that, since 1 April 2007, they have entered into 401 contracts involving the use of consultants, of which 384 relate to projects included in

the Capital Works Programme and 17 to other projects. The total value of the consultancy element of these projects is estimated at £15.53 million, made up of £12.38 million within the Capital Works Programme and £3.15 million for other projects. These costs are exclusive of VAT.

A list of the projects involving consultants is provided below. It should be noted that a number of consultancy contracts may be associated with the same project. The value of individual consultancy contracts is deemed to be commercially sensitive information which NIW is unable to release.

CAPITAL WORKS PROGRAMME PROJECTS

Kilmegan Road, Dundrum, Watermain
Springfield Avenue, Storm Sewer Extension
130a Upper Knockbreda Road, Belfast, Storm Sewer Extension
Abbey Park, Kilkeel, Sewer Replacement
Aghalee/Aghagallon Screens, Wastewater Treatment Works (WwTW)
Airfield Road, Foul Sewer Extension
Aldergrove, Sewerage Scheme
Altnahinch, Zone Watermain Improvements
Annaghmore WwTW
Annahilt WwTW
Antrim Road, Aldergrove, Trunk Sewer Replacement
Ards North, Carrowdore, Ballywalter, Ballyhaskin, WwTWs
Art Road, Artigarvin, Storm Sewer Extension
Ashfield Rd, Clogher, Watermain Extension
Ashley Gardens, Armagh, Foul Sewer Replacement
Assessment of Flow Monitoring in WwTWs
Backglan Road, Omagh, Booster Station
Ballinlea Road, Stranocum, Replacement Watermain
Ballyblagh, Lurgan, Pumping Main Replacement
Ballybogey WwTW
Ballycastle, Sea Outfall
Ballycastle WwTW
Ballycoleman, Strabane, Flood Alleviation Scheme
Ballycorr Road, Ballyclare, Storm Outfall
Ballyeaston Road, Ballyclare, Storm Sewer
Ballygawley/Cabragh Service Reservoir Link Main Watermain
Ballyhalbert WwTW, Interim Solution
Ballyholme (Bangor) Drainage Area Plan Phase 1
Ballykelly Main Street, Replacement Sewer
Ballylagan Road, Islandmore, Storm Sewer

Ballylough, Sewerage Scheme
Ballyloughan Road, Hamiltonsbawn, Watermain Extension
Ballymagorry WwTW
Ballynahinch, Watermain
Ballynahone, Zone Watermain Improvements
Ballynure Road, Ballyclare, Foul and Storm Sewers
Ballywalter Area, Watermains
Ballywalter WwTW, Interim Solution
Ballywhiskin WwTW, Interim Solution
Balteagh, Limavady, Watermain Extension
Banbridge Road, Waringstown, Foul Sewer Extension
Bancran Road, Draperstown, Watermain Extension
Bangor, Outer Zone Watermain Improvements
Bank Square, Maghera, Watermain
Barnside Road, Garvagh, Watermain Extension
Bartley Park, Kilkeel, Sewer Replacements
Belfast City Centre, Public Realm Phase 1, Area 1
Belfast Lough, North Shore WwTW
Belfast Sewers Project
Belfast WwTW, Sludge Tanks Refurbishment
Bendooragh Road, Ballymoney, Foul Sewer
Beragh, Foul and Storm Sewer
Birches Road to Cloncarrish Road, Sewer Extension
Black Cave and Upper Roddens, Larne, Sewage Improvements
Bracken Court, Coalisland, Storm Sewer Extension
Bramblewood, Crumlin, Sewer Repairs
Bravallan Road, Ballymoney, Storm Sewer
Breda, North Zone Watermain Improvements
Brishey Springs, Dungiven, Decommissioning
Brooke Hall, Cairnshill, Foul Sewer Extension
Brookmount Road to Hunters Crescent, Sewer Replacement
Burfitts Hill, Irvinestown, Watermain Replacement
Burnquarter Road (West), Ballymoney, Watermain Extension
Burren River Sewage Pumping Station (SPS) Upgrades and Networks Improvements
Burren Way, Cregagh, Sewer Upgrade and Flood Alleviation
Bushmills and Portballintrae WwTW
Caherty Road, Broughshane, Foul Sewers, Storm Sewers and Watermain
Campbell Terrace, Plumbridge, Storm Sewer Extension
Carbet Road, Portadown, Storm Sewer

Cargan, Zone Watermain Improvements
Carland Bridge (Cookstown Road), Road Realignment
Carmoney to Strabane, Strategic Link Watermain
Carnalea Road, Seskinore, Storm Sewer Extension
Carrigans Road, Newtownstewart, Watermain
Carrowdore WwTW
Carryduff, Trunk Sewer Upgrade
Castlecatt Road, Dervock, Foul Sewer
Castlecaulfield WwTW
Castlereagh, Zone Watermain Improvements
Castlerock Road, Coleraine, Storm Sewer
Castleroe Road, Coleraine, Foul Sewer Extension
Castor Bay to Lisburn, Trunk Main
Castor Bay, Armagh, Zone Watermain Improvements
Castor Bay/Moira, Zone Watermain Improvements
Causway/Aid, Sewer
Cavanacaw Road, Storm Sewer
Chapelstown, Ardglass, Sewerage Scheme
Charlotte Street/Newry Road, Warrenpoint, Sewer Improvement
Cherrymount Park, Bangor, Sewer Rehabilitation
Church Road, Rasharkin, Storm Sewer Extension
Clare Village, Sewerage Scheme
Clay Lake WTW, Remedial Work
Clay Lake Water Treatment Works (WTW), Lime Silo
Clay Lake, Zone Watermain Improvements
Cloghan Park, Belfast, Flood Alleviation
Cloncarrish Road, Birches, Storm Sewer Extension
Cloughwater Road, Ballymena, Watermain Extension
Cloughy WwTW, Interim Solution
Coast Road, Ballygally, Storm Sewer
Coast Road, Larne, Sewerage Scheme
Coastguard Road, Larne, Sewerage Scheme
Comber Area, Replacement Watermains
Cookstown Road, Moneymore, Foul Sewer Extension
Cookstown, Zone Watermain Improvements
Coolagh Road, Greysteel, Replacement Watermain
Craigs Road, Rasharkin, Foul Sewer Extension
Craigstown Road, Randalstown, Watermain Extension
Creaghmore Road, Drumquin, Foul Sewer Extension
Crevagh Park SPS Abandonment

Crevanagh Road, Omagh, Foul Sewer Pumping Main Extension
Crossgar Road, Ballynahinch, Storm Sewer
Crosshill Service Reservoir Water Booster Station, Larne
Crossmaglen WwTW
Crumlin Road, Lower Ballinderry, Storm and Foul Sewer Extensions
Culvacullion Road, Watermain Extension
Deerpark Lane, Watermain Extension
Darragh Cross WwTW
Demesne Road, Holywood, Foul and Storm Sewer
Derg, Omagh, Area Transfer Pumps
Derganagh Road, Knockloughrim, Watermain Extension
Derry Road, Storm Sewer
Derry Road, Strabane, Storm Sewer
Derrylin WwTW
Donagheday Road, Strabane, Storm Sewer
Draperstown WwTW
Dromara WwTW
Dromore Street, Rathfriland, Storm Sewer Extension
Drumaness WwTW
Drumbeg WwTW
Drumharvey and Drumduff, Watermain Extension
Drumlegagh WwTW
Drumlegagh, Storm Sewer Extension
Drummanmore Road, Armagh, Storm Sewer
Drumullan Road, Coagh, Watermain Extension
Dublinhill Road, Dromore, Watermain Extension
Dungannon Road, Moy, Storm Sewer Extension
Dungannon to Ballygawley (A4) Dualling Watermain Diversions
Dunmore Lane, Cookstown, Watermain Extension
Dunmurry WwTW and New Holland WwTW Odour Control
Dunmurry WwTW, Modifications
Dunnamore Road, Dunnamore, Storm Sewer Extension
East Belfast Drainage Area Plan
Edenderry WwTW
Enniskillen New Hospital, Water Main Extension
Enniskillen WwTW
Fincairn Road, Drumahoe, Storm Sewer Extension
Fintona Road, Clogher, Foul Pumping Main Extension
Finvoy Road, Ballymoney, Sewerage Scheme
Flood remediation measures phase 2

Fofanny/Banbridge, Zone Watermain Improvements
Garveys Road, Dorsey, Foul Sewer Extension
Process Road, Ballymoney, Foul Sewer
Garrison WwTW
Georgian Villas, Omagh, Replacement Watermain
Gilford Road, Portadown, Sewerage Upgrades
Gilford WwTW
Gillgooley Road, Omagh, Sewerage Scheme
Glenavy Road, Crumlin, Replacement Watermain
Glencuil to Cabragh, Strategic Link Watermain
Glendarragh SPS, Replacement Pumping Main
Glenhordial WTW, Expansion of existing Sludge Plant
Glenmornan WwTW, Upgrade
Gortin Road, Omagh, Storm Sewer
Gortinure Road, Gortinwood, Storm and Foul Sewer Extension
Gortnahey Road, Gortnahey, Dungiven Foul Sewer Extension
Greyabbey/Kircubbin WwTW
Hawthorn Hill, Foul Sewer Extension
Hugenot Drive, Lisburn, SPS Upgrade
Huntingdale Way, Ballyclare, SPS Rationalisation
Hydepark To Purdysburn Trunk Main, Connection At Newtownbreda Road.
Inisclan, Pumping Main Extension
Johnston Lodge, Hamiltonsbawn, Foul Sewer Extension
Kilbride Road/Bryantang Road, Doagh, Watermain Extension
Kilkeel Harbour SPS and Sewerage Improvements
Killyfaddy Road, Magherafelt, Sewerage Scheme
Killyhevlin to Lough Bradan, Link Watermain
Killyhevlin WTW Improvements to sludge settlement system
Killyman, Foul Sewer Extension
Killyman WwTW
Killymore Road, Gortin, Pumping Station
Kinoughtra, Teemore, Storm Sewer Extension
Knock Road, Ballymoney, Foul & Storm Sewer Extension
Knockahollet Sewerage Scheme, Technical Options
Knockloughrim, Storm Sewer
Kylemore Park, Belfast, Flood Alleviation
Larne WwTW
Lawrencetown WwTW, Upgrade
Ligoniel, Sewerage Scheme
Limekiln Lane, Aghalee, Watermain Extension

Limekiln Road, Newry, Foul Sewer Extension
Lisbarnet WwTW
Lisbeg Road, Watermain Extension
Lisburn Area Watermains
Lisburn to R.O.I. Border Trunk Road Improvements
Lisheegan Road, Rasharkin, watermain
Lisleitrum Road, Cullyhanna, Watermain Extension
Lisnagole Road, Lisnaskea, Foul Sewer Extension
Lisnally foul sewer
Lisnisky Lane/Portadown Road, Portadown, Sewer
Lissan Road, Cookstown, Replacement Storm Sewer
Listymore Road, Castlederg, Replacement Watermain
Londonderry Sewer Improvement Stage 2
Longisland Drive, Kircubbin, SPS Rising Main
Lough Fea, Zone Watermain Improvements
Loughbeg Road, Toomebridge, Watermain Extension
Loughguile, Zone Watermain Improvements
Loughmacrory, Storm Sewer Extension.
Lower Ballinderry WwTW
Lower Chichester Street, Belfast, Watermains Replacement, Belfast Public Realm
Lurgan and Portadown Public Realm Improvements
Maghaberry, Flood Alleviation Projects
Magheraknock Road, Ballynahinch, Sewer Replacement
Main Street, Broughshane, Watermain Replacement
Main Street, Tobermore, Foul and Storm Sewer
Martins Yard and Gilford Mill SPS Rationalisation
Milburn, Storm Sewer
Milltown Road, Antrim, foul sewer
Milltown WwTW
Monaghan Street, Sewerage System Investigation
Moneyreagh WwTW
Moss Road, Millisle, Sewer and Watermain Replacement
Mountfield WwTW
Mounthamilton SPS, Cloughmills, Replacement
Movilla Road, Newtownards, Foul Sewer Extension
Moygaggon Road, Donaghcloney, Civil Contract sewer
Mullaghboy WwTW
Mullaghmore, Storm Sewer
Mullanahoe Road, Ardboe, Foul Sewer
Mussenden Road, Articlave, Storm Sewer Extension

Newbridge Road, Ballymoney, Replacement Watermain
Newlodge Road, Antrim, Foul Sewer Extension
Newry Road, Mayobridge, Storm Foul Sewer Extension
Newtown Street and Patrick Street, Strabane Sewers
Newtownards/Comber Drainage Area Plan
Newtownbreda WwTW
Newtownbreda, Dunmurry, New Holland WwTWs, Nutrient Removal
Northern Key Transport Corridor, Ballymena, Watermain Scheme
Oak Park, Draperstown, Replacement Watermain
Old Eglisk Road, Dungannon, Watermain Extension
Orchard Hill Road, Dromore, Watermain
Ormeau Road, Storm Separation
Orritor Road, Cookstown, Sewer Replacement Phase 2
Park WwTW
Pipe Road, Randalstown, Watermain Extension
Portavogie WwTW, Interim Solution
Portballintrae, Zone Watermain Improvements
Portrush, Sewer Improvements Stage 4
Pound Road, Magherafelt, Storm Sewer
Poundburn WwTW
Prince William Road, Lisburn, Foul Sewer Extension
Purdysburn East, Zone Watermain Improvements
Raffrey, Watermain
Railway Terrace, Armoy, Storm Sewer and Watermain
Railway View/Woodtown Road, Ballymena, Sewerage Scheme
Rasharkin, Zone Watermain Improvements
Rathmore Road, Watermain Diversion
Ravarnet WwTW
Rear of 25 Main Street, Storm Sewer Extension
Re-direction of Effluents from Belfast Sludge Incinerator within Belfast WwTW
Removal of Stradreagh Spring Source
Repair of GAC Filters at Carmoney WTW
Reservoir Rehabilitation Western Area Phase1
Rezoning of Lenamore Springs Supply Area
Salinity Removal from Sewerage System discharging to North Down WwTW
Scroggy Road, Glenavy, Foul Sewer
Seagahan WTW
Seagahan, Zone Watermain Improvements
Service Reservoir Enhanced Security

Shantonagh Road, Fivemiletown, Watermain
Shore Road, Millisle, Sewer and Watermain Replacement
Sion Mills, Foul Sewer Extension
Six Roads Ends, Bangor, Replacement Watermains
Skerriff Road, Cullyhanna, Foul Sewer Extension
Sludge Logging System
Small WwTW Priority Upgrades
South Down, Zone Watermain Improvements
South Lisburn, Maze Area Infrastructure Appraisal (Sewerage)
South Zone Watermain Improvements
St Meryl Park/Kennedy Way Sewer Upgrade
St Patricks Avenue, Coleraine, Sewer Repair
St Patricks Terrace, Lisnaskea, Flood Alleviation Scheme
Station Road, Dervock, Foul Sewer
Stewartstown WwTW, Improvements
Strabane Road, Castlederg, Storm Sewer
Strategic Link, Castor Bay to Belfast (Trunk Watermain)
Strathroy, Omagh, Storm Sewer
The Brambles, Magherafelt, SPS Replacement
The Glens, Limavady, Watermain Replacement
The Square, Hillsborough, Storm Sewer Extension
The Woods, Old Glenarm Road, Larne, Storm Sewer Outfall
Thornleigh Park, Lisburn, Foul and Storm Sewer Upgrade
Tirwinney, Watermain Extension
Toberkeagh Road, Bushmills, Watermain Extension
Trotters Walk to Madden Road, Tandragee, Sewer Upgrade
Tullaghans Road, Rasharkin, Replacement Watermain
Warrenpoint WwTW
Water Resource Strategy
Whitehead, Ballystruder and Ballycarry Rationalisation
Woodburn Conduit

OTHER PROJECTS

Implementation of asset management model and delivery of new NIW asset management plan
Managing screens to reduce risk of failure
Chlorination: Planning for Periodic Review 09
Improving Water Treatment Security - Lifting the covers on alarms & unmanned sites
Phase 1 - Alternative filtration media
Provision of Advice and Guidance for the Procurement of the ICT Service Delivery Partner

Appointment of Licence Assessors
Business Objects Contract
System Programming Support Charges for 3 Month Period
Goods and Services Procurement Project
Procurement Project
Health and Safety Audit
Occupational Health assessments
Public Relations Strategy
Non-Executive Director legal duties
Econometric Analysis for Regulatory Returns
Regulatory Reporter

Replacement of Road Signs

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his department's policy for replacing road signs affected by (i) vandalism; and (ii) deterioration. (AQW 4409/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service carries out regular inspections of all public roads and footways, to ensure that essential maintenance needs are identified and that the work is completed as necessary. During these inspections all defects are noted, including defective or vandalised signs and signs requiring cleaning to improve their visibility. The frequency of these inspections depends on the type of road and the volume of vehicular and pedestrian traffic. Town centres and major traffic routes are inspected monthly, while all other roads and footways are inspected at either two or four monthly intervals.

Traffic-Calming Measures

Mrs McGill asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration the Roads Service has given to the installation of traffic calming measures at Fountain Street on the Strabane-Plumbridge road in order to improve pedestrian and motorist safety. (AQW 4420/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that a scheme to provide traffic calming measures at the Fountain Street area of Strabane is included in its 2008/09 Traffic Calming Programme. It is anticipated that a preliminary consultation meeting with elected representatives and residents of the area will take place in April 2008.

Sewage Pumping Station, Strabane

Mrs McGill asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the scheme to upgrade the Ballycolman Estate sewage pumping station in Strabane. (AQW 4423/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that work to upgrade the Ballycolman Sewage Pumping Station in Strabane is scheduled to commence during March 2008 at an estimated cost of £1.2 million. This work will be completed by January 2009 and should substantially reduce the risk of flooding in the area. In the interim, NIW will continue to monitor closely the performance of the Pumping Station and take any necessary action to prevent or reduce flooding problems.

Parking Tickets

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of appeals against parking tickets, issued under the NCP scheme, that are currently awaiting determination; and the length of time those appeals have been pending. (AQW 4447/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: There are three stages to the appeals process against a Parking Penalty Charge notice (PCN). At 28 February 2008, the numbers of appeals against PCNs awaiting determination by my Department's Roads Service are as follows:

1. **Informal Challenge** to Roads Service. 344 informal challenges (oldest has been with Roads Service for 7 working days).
2. **Formal Representation** to Roads Service. 325 formal representations (oldest has been with Roads Service for 22 working days). Formal representations can be received following the issue of a Notice to Owner. Formal representations may previously have been the subject of an informal challenge.
3. **Formal Appeal** to an independent adjudicator. 17 formal appeals to an adjudicator (oldest has been with Roads Service for 8 working days). Appeals can be received following a Notice of Rejection of Representation. All Appeals will previously have been the subject of a formal representation.

Parking Tickets

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the reasons for the delay in processing appeals against parking tickets issued

under the NCP scheme; and (ii) the action he is taking to address the backlog of appeals. (AQW 4448/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has, at present, no significant backlog for this type of correspondence. I would add that, in the current financial year, 97% of informal challenges have been responded to within 15 working days. This is above the overall Roads Service target for dealing with this type of correspondence.

Bus Routes

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to provide funding for the 4 daily bus routes that service Dromore, when the current funding runs out at the end of March 2008. (AQW 4456/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Department will not be providing further funding for the four daily bus routes that service Dromore when current funding under the Department's bus challenge scheme ends on 31 March 2008. However, I am aware that the Ulsterbus district manager is currently consulting with local community representatives on the issues involved and seeking to identify alternative sources of financial support.

Hillsborough Road, Dromore

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the action his department is taking to provide an alternative bus route to service Dromore town centre, due to the closure of the Hillsborough Road. (AQW 4457/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that Hillsborough Road, Dromore is now open to two-way traffic. Accordingly, the bus service has now returned to normal.

Hillsborough Road, Dromore

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a timescale within which the repairs to the Hillsborough Road, Dromore, will be completed; and to detail the action his department is taking to expedite the repairs. (AQW 4458/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the closure of Hillsborough Road Dromore was brought about by the actions of a builder, excavating too close to the edge of the road, potentially destabilising the

carriageway and compromising the safety of road users and workers on the site.

Roads Service is engaged with both the builder and developer in seeking a resolution to this matter. The builder has employed a geotechnical engineer to design remedial works, which have been accepted by Roads Service. He has now placed a large volume of rock fill against the excavated face, supporting it and enabling one lane of traffic to use the road in safety.

I am advised by my officials that the builder has also submitted plans to install sheet piles along the edge of the road and, when completed, this should enable the second lane to be opened as well. Checking of the design must be thorough to ensure the safety of road users and when my officials are satisfied that the design is adequate permission to begin the installation work will be granted. The actual installation of the sheet piles should take no longer than a week. However, it is not possible to provide an accurate timescale for this work to be completed, at this time.

In the interim, I can confirm that traffic lights have been installed at the site, enabling traffic to use Hillsborough Road in both directions.

My officials are applying as much pressure as possible to ensure that this work is carried out with minimum delay.

Traffic-Calming Measures

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his department's plans to provide a pedestrian crossing or traffic calming measures at Riverside Health and Social Care Centre, Strabane. (AQW 4463/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that traffic calming measures were provided at Upper Main Street, Strabane in 2002. At that time a flat top road hump was introduced adjacent to the Health Centre.

A recent pedestrian/vehicle volume survey has indicated that the site now merits the introduction of a zebra crossing. I can confirm that Roads Service will introduce a zebra crossing, on the existing flat top road hump, as part of its 2008/09 programme.

Cycle Lane on the Stewartstown Road

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a timescale within which the Roads Service will install a cycle lane on the Stewartstown Road, Dunmurry. (AQW 4473/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's programme for the provision of cycling

facilities is largely based on the proposals contained within the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP), although other routes where a current or latent need appears to exist, can also be considered.

Stewartstown Road was not identified in BMTP as a cycle route and as such, a full examination of its suitability for provision of facilities has not been undertaken. However, you may be interested to know that, as part of a Safer Routes to School Initiative, Roads Service, working in conjunction with Oakwood Integrated Primary School, has widened a section of the footway on the adjacent McKinsty's Road to provide a cycle track. Roads Service also proposes to extend this facility along the Stewartstown Road from its junction with McKinsty's Road to Lagmore Dale during 2008/09.

It is likely that in the future Roads Service will initiate action to identify the need for further cycling facilities throughout the North. However, it is not possible to give a timescale for this work at present.

Road Infrastructure

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the strategic importance his department attaches to (i) the A26; (ii) the A1; and (iii) the M1, in developing Northern Ireland's road infrastructure. (AQW 4483/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service applies the guidance set out in the Regional Development Strategy (RDS), and its daughter document, the Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS), when assessing the strategic importance of roads within the Strategic Road Network.

The Strategic Road Network comprises five Key Transport Corridors, four Link Corridors, and the remaining Trunk Road Network. The RDS and the RTS give priority to the Key Transport Corridors, next the Link Corridors and then the Trunk Roads.

The A26 (Moirra to Coleraine), the A1 (Lisburn to Newry) and the M1, are all routes within the Key Transport Corridors and hence have primary importance within the Strategic Road Network. The Strategic Road Improvement Programme includes schemes to improve these routes, some of which are currently under construction.

Road Signs: Cleansing

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his department's cleansing policy for road signs. (AQW 4495/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service carries out regular inspections of all public roads and footways, to ensure that essential maintenance needs are identified and that the work is completed as necessary. During these inspections all defects are noted, including defective or vandalised signs and signs requiring cleaning to improve their visibility. The frequency of these inspections depends on the type of road and the volume of vehicular and pedestrian traffic. Town centres and major traffic routes are inspected monthly, while all other roads and footways are inspected at either two or four monthly intervals.

Comber Bypass

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the proposed third phase of the Comber by-pass. (AQW 4521/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the current draft Ards and Down Area Plan includes a proposal to provide a link road from the Ballygowan Road to the Comber bypass. This proposed link road is known locally as Phase 3 of the Comber bypass.

The scheme was the subject of a number of objections at the Area Plan Public Inquiry, which finished in January 2007. Roads Service is awaiting the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) Inspector's report, which is expected before the end of March 2008. Roads Service will consider this report and may then adopt the plan, in whole or in part.

However, the proposed road scheme is not considered a high priority and is not part of the Forward Planning Schedule of schemes considered for construction within the next ten years.

Water Provision

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline, by road, the areas whose water provision is serviced by asbestos cement piping in (i) Magherafelt; and (ii) Cookstown districts. (AQW 4523/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it does not keep records of the areas in Magherafelt and Cookstown where water is supplied by asbestos cement pipes, and is therefore unable to provide the breakdown sought. However, there are 311 roads in the Magherafelt and Cookstown districts which contain a variety of types of pipework including asbestos cement pipes, and these are listed below. It is

important to note that in some cases the asbestos cement pipes are used to supply reservoirs rather than distribute water to customers.

All asbestos cement pipes within the water supply network are approved fully for use within the UK water industry.

Aghaveagh Road	Beechland Drive	Coleraine Road
Annaghmore Road	Beechland Road	Cookstown Road
Ardboe Road	Bellshill Road	Coolreaghs Road
Aughagranna Road	Blackrock Road	Coolshinney Road
Aughrim Road	Brackaghlistlea Road	Corby Road
Baladoogh Lane	Bridge Street	Corkill Road
Ballinderry Bridge Rd	Bridger Street	Corrycroar Road
Ballybriest Road	Broagh Road	Corvanaghan Road
Ballydawley Road	Brookend Road	Craigs Road
Ballygillen Road	Brookmount Road	Crawfordsburn Dr
Ballygonny Road East	Brough Road	Creagh Road
BallyGruby Road	Broughderg Road	Creevagh Road
Ballyheifer Road	Brown Drive	Crew Road
Ballymacilcurr Road	Cahore Road	Crocknamohilroad
Ballymacombs Road	Camlough Road	Culbane Road
Ballymaguigan Road	Curran Road	Camletown Terrace
Ballymaguire Road	Carn View	Davagh Road
Ballymoghna Road	Carnaman Road	Davison Villas
Ballymoyle Road	Carncoose Road	Deerpark Road
Ballymulligan Road	Carnenny Lane	Desertmartin Road
Ballynacross Road	Carraloan Road	Dirnan Road
Ballynafeagh Road	Carricknakilt Road	Drapersfield Road
BallynAgarve Road	Castle Street	Draperstown Road
Ballynagilly Road	Castledawson Road	Dreenan Road
Ballynakilly Road	Castlefarm Road	Dromore Road
Ballynasolus Road	Cavanakeeran Road	Drum Road
Ballynease Road	Cavanoneill Road	Drumad Road
Ballyneill Road	Chichester Avenue	Drumard Hill
Ballyronan Road	Church Street	Drumard Road
Ballyscullion Road	Circular Road	Drumbolg Road
Bardahessiagh Lane	Clady Road	Drumconready Rd
Bardahessiagh Road	Claggan Road	Drumearn Road
Battery Road	Cloghog Road	Drumgrass Road
Beaghmore RoAd	Clooney Road	Drumlamp Road
Beatrice Villas	Cloverhill Road	Drumlane Road

Drumnamalta Road	Hillhead Road	Limehill Road
Drumrot Road	Hospital Road	Lindsay Ville
Dungannon Road	Hunters Park	Lismoyle Road
Dunnamore Road	Iniscarn Road	Lisnagrot Road
Dunronan Road	Innishrush Road	Lisnahall Road
Duntibryan Road	Keenaghan Road	Lisnamuck Road
Eden Road	Keerin Road	Lisnanane Lane
Fair Hill	Kilcronaghan Road	Lissan Road
Fairhill Road	Killeenan Road	Littlebridge Road
Fallaghloon Road	Killyberry Road	Longfield Lane
Fallahogy Road	Killyboggin Road	Longfield Road
Feegarron Road	Kilycanavan Road	Lough Fea Road
Flo Road	Killycolpy Road	Loughdoo Road
Ford Road	Killycurragh Road	Loughnamarve Road
Forgetown Road	Killyfaddy Road	Loup Road
Garden Street	Killygarvan Road	Lower Kildress Road
Garrison Road	Killymoon Road	Lucy Street
Garvagh Road	Killymuck Road	Lurganagoose Road
Gausson Villas	Killyneedan Road	Lurgy Road
Glen Road	Killywoolaghan Rd	Macknagh Road
Glenarny Road	Kilrea Road	Maghadone Lane
Glenmaquill Road	Kiltyclay Road	Magherafelt Road
Glenone Road	Kilteyclogher Road	Magheraglass Road
Gorse Road	King Street	Main Street
Gortahurk Road	Kinnagillian Road	Malcolm Villas
Gortnaskea Road	Kinrush Road	Market Street
Gortnaskey Road	Kirk Avenue	Mayogall Road
Gortreagh Road	Knockadoo Road	Mckinney Park
Gortsraheen Road	Knockaleery Road	Meenanea Road
Gracefield Road	Knocknagin Road	Megargy Road
Grange Road	Knocknakielt Road	Mill Lane
Grove Terrace	Lammy Road	Moboy Road
Gulladuff Hill	Lawford Street	Moneygaragh Road
Gulladuff RoAd	Legmurn Road	Moneygran Road
Hammond Street	Legnacash Road	Moneyhaw Road
Hervey Hill Road	Lester Park	Moneymore Road
High Street	Letteran Road	Moneyneany Road
Moneysallin Road	Ringsend Close	Trickvallen Road
Moneysharvan Road	River View	Tullyard Road
Moorside Villas	Quarry Road	Tanderagee Road

Moss Road	Queens Avenue	Templereagh Road
Mountjoy Road	Rainey Street	Tirgan Road
Moyagoney Road	Rectory Road	Tirgarvil Road
Moydamlaght Road	Riverview Park	Tirkane Road
Moykeeran Crescent	Rock Road	Tirnaskea Road
MoYkeeran Drive	Rockdale Road	Tobermore Road
Moyola Court	Rocktown Road	Tobin Park
Moyola Road	Roshure Road	Tullyboy Road
Moyola View	Ruskey Road	Tullycall Road
Mulderg Road	Salterstown Road	Tullylagan Road
Mullagh Lane	Sandholes Road	Tullynagee Road
Mullaghboy Crescent	Sandy Braes	Tullynure Road
Mullaghboy Road	Scotchtown Lane	Tullyodonnell Road
Mulnavoo Road	Sersons Road	Tullyreavy Road
Murnells Road	Sessiagh Scott Road	Tulnacross Road
New Line Road	Shivey Road	Turnaface Road
New Road	Shore Road	Union Road
North Street	Sixtowns Road	Upper Kildress Road
Northland Drive	Slate Quarry Road	Urbal Lane
Northland Gardens	Slemish View	Waterfoot Road
Northland Road	Sluggan Road	Wellbrook Road
O'hara Road	Sperrin Drive	West Street
Old Tyanee Road	Sperrin View	William Street
Oldtown Road	Springfield Park	Windsor Terrace
Orritor Road	Springhill Road	Wood Road
Oughterard Road	Station Road	Woodvale Crescent
Park View	Strews Road	
Parker Avenue	Tamlaght Road	
Pomeroy Road	Tamnaskeeney Road	
Pound Road	Tamney Crescent	

Foyle Bridge

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the status of the electronic road signage on the Foyle Bridge; and to detail his plans to make temporary speed limits during high wind alerts enforceable by statute. (AQW 4546/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the Variable Message Signs, on both sides of the Foyle Bridge, display an advisory speed limit during periods of high winds. There are currently no plans to make these temporary speed limits mandatory and enforceable.

It is the responsibility of drivers, using the bridge, to take heed of the warnings displayed and drive accordingly.

Water Pipes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the steps he is taking to repair the Ballybean Road, Moneyreagh, including its banks, following the installation of new water pipes.
(AQW 4608/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the laying of new watermain along the Ballybean Road, Moneyreagh was recently carried out using mostly trenchless techniques. The contractor reinstated and topsoiled the verges before leaving. A recent inspection found that significant damage has been caused to some of the verges due to traffic passing on this narrow country road. Northern Ireland Water has arranged for its contractor to return to the site to undertake any necessary remedial work, and this will take place when the weather is appropriate for grass seeding.

Press Officers

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of press officers employed by his department.
(AQW 4680/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Within the Department for Regional Development, core information services are currently provided by four press officers, all of whom are seconded from OFMDFM's Executive Information Service.

A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue Road Scheme

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the alleged monetary disagreement between Lagan Ferrovial and Brian Herron Contracts, in relation to the A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue road scheme; and to confirm that work on the new road will not be delayed by the alleged dispute.
(AQW 4681/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Any alleged monetary disagreement between Lagan Ferrovial and Brian Herron Contracts in relation to the A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue dual carriageway scheme is not a matter for my Department.

My Department's Design, Build, Finance and Operate Contractor (DBFO Co) for the A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue dual carriageway scheme, which is

being constructed as part of Package 2 of Road Service's Public Private Partnership Programme, is Amey Lagan Roads Limited, a consortium formed by Amey Ventures Limited and Lagan Projects Limited. The DBFO Co's construction contractor is Lagan Ferrovial who engaged Brian Herron Contracts, as an earthworks sub-contractor, to undertake part of the works. Therefore, if there is a monetary disagreement between Lagan Ferrovial and Brian Herron Contracts it is a matter for these parties to resolve and my Department has no involvement whatsoever.

I am advised that it is not anticipated that such an alleged monetary disagreement between Lagan Ferrovial and Brian Herron Contracts would have any potential to delay work on the new A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue dual carriageway.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Millburn Scheme

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to the answer to AQW 3801/08, what assurance she can give that the urgent safety issues raised will determine the start date for the Millburn scheme.
(AQW 4382/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The safety issues referred to in my previous answer relate to the low numbers of electrical power points within the affected dwellings. The works proposed through the Multi-Element Improvement scheme include the upgrading of the electrics within all included dwellings to current standards.

The scheme is currently programmed to start in October 2008, but like all programmed schemes it will be subject to the availability of finance.

Housing Executive

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number and location of vacant properties owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in (i) the Strabane District Council area; and (ii) the Omagh District Council area.
(AQW 4428/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of vacant dwellings for the administrative areas covered by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Strabane and Omagh District Offices is as follows:

Housing Executive District	Difficult to Let	Undergoing Major Repairs/Improvements/decant properties	Pending Sale or Demolition	Total
Strabane	4	30	10	45
Omagh	16	21	29	66
Total	20	51	39	111

The locations of the vacant properties are as follows:

Strabane District

Four flats in Lisnafin Park which are included within an ongoing strategy to reduce vacant dwellings.

Undergoing Major Repairs/Improvements

Twenty two dwellings throughout the district office area are subject to major improvements and all have been allocated. The ongoing work will be completed prior to occupation by the new tenants.

Eight further dwellings are being used as decant properties to facilitate major improvement schemes. The properties are located at Townsend Street, Ardnalee Park, Bridge Street (3 properties), Magirr Park, Church View and Meetinghouse Street

Dwellings at Millbrook Gardens, Patrician Villas, Lisnafin Park (3 properties), Springhill Park (4 properties) and Church Square are pending sale or demolition.

Omagh District Office

There are difficult to let properties within the Ashfield estate, Fintona and Strathroy, Omagh. There are also a number of difficult to let 1 bedroom flats in Strathroy. The Housing Executive is currently working on a strategy which will look at the conversion of these units to 2 bedroom dwellings.

Properties at Gortview/Killybrack, Strathroy and Mullaghmore, are undergoing major repairs/improvements. Some vacant flats are being held pending the commencement of an improvement scheme at Mullaghmore.

Twenty two (of 23) properties at Mullaghmore are currently under consideration. A block of 6 flats at Meadowbank, Fintona will be placed on the open market.

Social Security Modernisation Programme

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQO 1622/08, to detail the project slippages and delays that occurred

in relation to (i) the Social Security Modernisation Programme; and (ii) the completion of the Jobs and Benefits Accommodation Project. (AQW 4471/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Social Security Modernisation Programme currently consists of 20 projects, including the Jobs & Benefits Project, which are at various stages of implementation. The majority of projects are progressing according to plan. In addition 4 projects have closed in 07/08, following successful implementation. The following projects have experienced slippage and/or an underspend during the current financial year.

Project	Details of slippage	07/08 Financial Impact £
Strategic Business Review	8 months	Nil
On-Time Solutions	5 months	Nil
Jobs & Benefits Project	PSA Target to complete rollout by March 2008. Revised target is to complete rollout by March 2011	£6m underspend
Business Control Systems	Original date June 2007. Revised date to be confirmed.	Nil
Fraud Referral & Intervention Management System	Original date Dec 2007. Revised date to be confirmed.	Nil
Cheque Reconciliation Replacement Project	Nil	£28,000 underspend
Compensation Recovery Unit Project	Nil – Project closed 31/10/07	£121,382 underspend
Debt Modernisation Project	Nil	£66,000 underspend
Central Payment System	Delayed 12 months from October 2008 to October 2009.	Nil

Belfast Regeneration Office

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the amount of money her department has given, through the Belfast Regeneration Office, to area partnerships facilitating neighbourhood renewal partnerships, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4480/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In 2005/2006 £742,625 was given to area partnerships through the Belfast Regeneration Office; this increased to £904,268 in 2006/07 with £988,597 paid to date this financial year.

Housing Executive's Non-Mobility Stock

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of (i) major; and (ii) minor, adaptations to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's non-mobility stock that have been made in each district, in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 4484/08)

The Minister for Social Development: As this information runs to several pages I have placed it in the Assembly Library

Social Housing Projects

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the plans she has to develop social housing projects in (i) Banbridge; (ii) Craigavon; (iii) Lurgan; and (iv) Portadown, in each of the next 3 years; and to outline the projected costs involved.

(AQW 4485/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The need for social housing in Banbridge, Craigavon, Lurgan and Portadown is addressed through the five year social housing development programme. The new five year programme is currently being finalised and I have asked the Housing Executive to send a copy to you as soon as it is available.

Care System

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the needs assessment her department has undertaken for young people, over the age of 18, leaving the care system. (AQW 4496/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive works closely with the Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety, the four Boards and five Trusts to address the future housing need of young people over the age of 18 leaving care. Health and Social Services are responsible for developing a pathway plan for young people in care, and leaving care. This pathway plan is the process by which the Trusts identify the housing needs of young people leaving care.

There are a number of existing inter-agency structures, notably children service planning which provide a framework for identifying and commissioning services for this client group. This has resulted in the provision of processes and services across all Health Board areas throughout Northern Ireland.

Care System

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the planning and commissioning process to respond to the needs of young people over the age of 18 leaving the care system, and the services that have been put in place as a result. (AQW 4497/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive works closely with the Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety, the four Boards and five Trusts to address the future housing need of young people over the age of 18 leaving care. Health and Social Services are responsible for developing a pathway plan for young people in care, and leaving care. This pathway plan is the process by which the Trusts identify the housing needs of young people leaving care.

There are a number of existing inter-agency structures, notably children service planning which provide a framework for identifying and commissioning services for this client group. This has resulted in the provision of processes and services across all Health Board areas throughout Northern Ireland.

Accommodation Budget

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the annual savings her department has made on the accommodation budget under 'supporting people', as a result of the increase in the number of young people over the age of 18 remaining with their foster carer. (AQW 4498/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has no information regarding possible savings. It is difficult at this early stage to quantify any such reduced demand bearing in mind one cannot be sure how many of those who will now remain with their foster carer would have otherwise accessed Housing Executive services. The Housing Executive will of course continue to monitor.

Development Funds

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of funding allocated from the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund to (i) the Belfast Regeneration Office; and (ii) the North West Development Office, in the 2006-07 and 2007-08, financial years. (AQW 4501/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The figures requested are as follows:

TABLE 1. NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL INVESTMENT FUND ALLOCATION TO BRO AND NWDO IN 2006/07 AND 2007/08

	2006/07 £m	2007/08 £m
Belfast Regeneration Office	9.742	11.259
North West Development Office	4.447	4.393

Share Fishermen

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the changes she will make to legislation in relation to the unique circumstances that share fishermen have in accessing the benefit system. (AQW 4506/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Share fishermen already have a unique position in the benefit system in that they pay a special higher rate of Class 2 National Insurance contributions which gives them access to contribution-based Jobseeker's Allowance. Contribution-based Jobseeker's Allowance has special rules which are specifically designed to provide share fishermen with the necessary financial support for those periods when they are unable to fish because of factors such as bad weather or because their boat is undergoing repairs.

At this point I have no plans to change the existing legislation relating to share fishermen.

Affordable Housing in Rural Settlements

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the discussions she has had, and presentations she has made to (i) the Ministerial sub-group; and (ii) the Minister of the Environment, in relation to the relaxation of PPS14 for new build social and affordable housing in rural settlements. (AQW 4512/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have not had detailed discussions nor made presentations in relation to the relaxation of PPS14. I have attended 3 meetings of the Ministerial sub-group, chaired by the Minister of the Environment, on 12 November 2007, 10 December 2007 and 14 January 2008 to discuss social housing requirements within PPS14.

Housing Accommodation

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the total number of people who currently require housing accommodation. (AQW 4524/08)

The Minister for Social Development: At 31 December 2007 there were 38,332 applicants on the

waiting list for social housing, of which 20,692 had 30 or more points.

Homes Built

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of homes that will be built in the Newry and Armagh constituency in the next financial year. (AQW 4525/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This information will be available when the updating of the five year social housing development programme is complete. I have asked the Housing Executive to send a copy to you as soon as it is available.

The tables below contain waiting list information for the Housing Executive's Armagh District Office and Newry District office.

TABLE 1
ARMAGH DISTRICT OFFICE WAITING LIST
(AT 31 DECEMBER 2007)

Applicants	Applicants with 30 or more points	Allocations (year to 31 December 2007)
860	382	172

TABLE 2
NEWRY DISTRICT OFFICE WAITING LIST
(AT 31 DECEMBER 2007)

Applicants	Applicants with 30 or more points	Allocations (year to 31 December 2007)
512	309	58

Former British Military Bases

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the considerations she has given to providing social and affordable housing at former British Military Bases in the Newry and Armagh constituency. (AQW 4530/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has expressed an interest in three former Ministry of Defence bases within the Newry & Armagh parliamentary constituency. All three sites were trawled through the Surplus Public Sector Lands process.

Forkhill

The Forkhill base is an eight acre site which, in a draft Concept Masterplan, is proposed for mixed use development to provide an opportunity for investment in local business, community and housing. The housing component will take up two of the eight acres

and is expected to be a mixed tenure proposal. Fold Housing Association has been nominated to develop the scheme. The social housing need is for approximately 8 units.

Drumadd, Armagh

This site was originally trawled in June 2006 and as there was no social housing need at that time, the Housing Executive did not register an expression of interest. The disposal process is now well advanced with another party. However the Housing Executive is investigating affordability potential – the current social housing need is for approximately 16 units.

Keady

The Housing Executive has confirmed a social housing need for approximately 10 units and has expressed an interest in this former Ministry of Defence/Police Service for Northern Ireland site.

Racist Attacks

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the policies her department has in place to assist the needs of families whose homes are subject to racist attacks. (AQW 4582/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive funded by the Northern Ireland Office and the Police Service for Northern Ireland, implements the Hate Incident Practical Action Scheme. The purpose of the Scheme is to provide personal and home protection measures to victims of incidents perceived to be of a racial or other hate related nature. The scheme is intended to ensure that residents of properties that have been the subject of a racist attack or other hate incidents, at or close to their home, are afforded support both during and after normal working hours.

Living Initiative Areas

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans to implement the Town Centre Living Initiative Areas in smaller towns and villages. (AQW 4584/08)

The Minister for Social Development: On 1 January 2008, five new Town Centre Living Initiative Areas (TCLIAs) became operational in Ballynahinch, Ballycastle, Omagh, Antrim and Armagh. At the same time a number of smaller TCLIA pilot schemes in Tandragee, Bushmills, Newtown Stewart and Portaferry were approved.

House Infestations

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of (i) mouse; (ii) rat; and (iii) insect infestations, which were reported to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in each of the past five years, by Northern Ireland Housing Executive district. (AQW 4589/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This information is not readily available in the format requested. However, the following table details the number of infestations reported to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, and the associated costs, in the period 1 January to 31 December 2007.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive District Office	Cost	Number*
Belfast West	£18,855	419
Belfast East	£11,461	218
Belfast South	£12,977	248
Belfast North	£20,486	328
Belfast Shankill	£19,668	358
Bangor	£3,130	67
Newtownards	£7,478	123
Castlereagh	£8,754	146
Lisburn Antrim St.	£6,314	103
Lisburn Dairy Farm	£6,082	104
Downpatrick	£3,993	84
Banbridge	£3,955	66
Newry	£9,048	173
Lurgan/Brownlow	£6,268	111
Portadown	£3,741	65
Dungannon	£1,890	32
Fermanagh	£6,329	97
Ballymena	£4,127	66
Antrim	£5,786	93
Newtownabbey 1	£4,140	92
Newtownabbey 2	£2,745	61
Carrick	£4,410	98
Larne	£2,643	48
Ballycastle	£2,854	49
Ballymoney	£3,509	60
Coleraine	£7,615	129
Waterloo Place	£6,175	93

Northern Ireland Housing Executive District Office	Cost	Number*
Waterside	£3,554	60
Collon Terrace	£6,121	97
Limavady	£1,800	40
Magherafelt	£2,509	45
Strabane	£5,627	100
Omagh	£3,397	59
Cookstown	£2,122	46
	£219,563	3,978

* This figure includes multiple visits to individual properties to address reports of infestations. This is based on current NIHE stock levels of around 90,000 properties.

House Infestations

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the cost of combating (i) mouse; (ii) rat; and (iii) insect infestations at Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties in each of the past five years, by Northern Ireland Housing Executive district. (AQW 4590/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This information is not readily available in the format requested. However, the following table details the number of infestations reported to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, and the associated costs, in the period 1 January to 31 December 2007.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive District Office	Cost	Number*
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Northern Ireland Housing Executive District Office	Cost	Number*
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Fermanagh	£6,329	97
Ballymena	£4,127	66
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Newtownabbey 2	£2,745	61
Carrick	£4,410	98
Larne	£2,643	48
Ballycastle	£2,854	49
Ballymoney	£3,509	60
Coleraine	£7,615	129
Waterloo Place	£6,175	93
Waterside	£3,554	60
Collon Terrace	£6,121	97
Limavady	£1,800	40
Magherafelt	£2,509	45
Strabane	£5,627	100
Omagh	£3,397	59
Cookstown	£2,122	46
	£219,563	3,978

* This figure includes multiple visits to individual properties to address reports of infestations. This is based on current NIHE stock levels of around 90,000 properties

Provision of Social Housing

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to provide a timescale within which work will start on the provision of social housing at Upper Crescent, Comber. (AQW 4654/08)

The Minister for Social Development: BIH Housing Association has signed the contract for the social housing at Upper Crescent Comber and the Contractor has taken possession of the site. Hoarding has been erected and site huts are in place. The contract commencement date was 29 February 2008 with a contract period of 88 weeks. There will be three phases of completion with the first houses due in May 2009.

Press Officers

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of press officers employed by her department. (AQW 4679/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Five press officers are employed by the Department for Social Development.

Redevelopment of the Village Area, South Belfast

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the streets that are being considered for vesting in the Village area, as part of the regeneration project. (AQW 4687/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The streets being considered are in the area bounded by Donegall Road, Glenmachan Street, Tates Avenue, Donegall Avenue and the railway line. Also included is the Monarch Street/ Monarch Parade/ Lower Rockview Street area to the north side of Donegall Road.

Redevelopment of the Village Area, South Belfast

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the aspects of need that will be targeted by the initial commitment of £7 million to the Village area, South Belfast. (AQW 4689/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The £7 million announced recently will be used to improve housing conditions. The details will be discussed and agreed at a Village planning meeting on 10 March 2008. This will involve representatives from the area, the Housing Executive and my Department.

Redevelopment of the Village Area, South Belfast

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the protection that will be afforded to homeowners in the Village area, who fear they will be forced into smaller accommodation and increased financial burden as a result of vesting. (AQW 4694/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Homeowners affected by any vesting are entitled to the Market Value of their property plus Home Loss and Disturbance payments. They can also appoint an agent to act on their behalf and appropriate fees are payable by the Housing Executive.

Following any vesting order each household affected will have its future housing requirements determined and every effort will be made to meet these requirements within the social sector in a reasonable timescale. Alternatively, following receipt of compensation people may choose to make their own arrangements.

Opportunities to provide affordable private sector housing within the proposed Village renewal area for those wishing to remain in the area will be fully explored.

Empty Homes Strategy

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to her department's Empty Homes Strategy, if she plans to adopt the recommendation of the Semple report to release social sector voids for purchase by low income first time buyers, with appropriate arrangements to ensure affordability in perpetuity; and to detail the reasons for not adopting this recommendation. (AQW 4721/08)

The Minister for Social Development: An Implementation plan outlining how the Government will take forward each of the 80 recommendations from the Semple review has been developed. This Plan sets out the work required, timescale and department responsible for the delivery of each recommendation. Where a recommendation is not considered appropriate to take forward, details explaining why have been included.

I have submitted this Implementation Plan to my Executive Colleagues and once it receives their formal approval, I will publish it, alongside the report from my Independent Panel of Experts who also undertook their own analysis of the Semple review

Development Funds

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the level of funding allocated, in the 2006-07 and 2007-2008 financial years, to (a) the Belfast Regeneration Office; and (b) the North West Development Office, from the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund; and (ii) the reasons for using the criteria selected to allocate funding to each area. (AQW 4732/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The figures requested are as follows:

TABLE 1. NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL INVESTMENT FUND ALLOCATION TO BRO AND NWDO IN 2006/07 AND 2007/08

	2006/07 £m	2007/08 £m
Belfast Regeneration Office	9.742	11.259
North West Development Office	4.447	4.393

With regard to part (ii), indicative budgets within the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund are agreed at the beginning of each financial year and allocated on a per capita basis. Within the year some adjustment in allocations takes place to ensure the greatest possible use of the funds available.

Official Visits

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of official visits she has made to each parliamentary constituency since taking up office. (AQW 4734/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My diary records show a total number of 128 visits made since taking office and I have set out in the table below the number of visits I have made in each parliamentary constituency in Northern Ireland from 08 May 2007 to 10 March 2008.

Constituency	No of Visits
Belfast East	7
Belfast North	12
Belfast South	15
Belfast West	10
East Antrim	6
Fermanagh/South Tyrone	10
Foyle	11
Lagan Valley	4
Londonderry East	1
Mid Ulster	2
Newry & Armagh	11
North Antrim	4
North Down	2
South Down	10
South Antrim	3
Strangford	3
Upper Bann	6
West Tyrone	11
Total	128

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans to withdraw jobseeker's allowance from claimants who do not secure employment within the first 12 months of receipt of this benefit. (AQW 4741/08)

The Minister for Social Development: There are no plans to withdraw jobseeker's allowance from claimants who do not secure employment within the first 12 months of receipt of the benefit.

The current process is effective in encouraging jobseekers to comply with the benefit rules about

looking for work. As we enhance the JSA regime, I will keep the issue of sanctions under constant review.

Housing Executive Accommodation

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm that foreign nationals arriving in Northern Ireland do not receive preferential treatment over those already resident, in relation to the allocation of accommodation from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. (AQW 4742/08)

The Minister for Social Development: All applicants are assessed to determine whether they have an entitlement to homelessness assistance / housing accommodation. If applicants who are foreign nationals are determined to be eligible for assistance, their housing need is assessed under the Common Selection Scheme and their application is ranked on the Waiting List, as with all other applicants.

Disabled Facilities Grants

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, for each of the last 3 years, the amount of money allocated through Disabled Facilities Grants in (i) the North Down constituency; and (ii) Northern Ireland. (AQW 4756/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This information is not held by constituency area. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Dundonald Grants office covers the North Down, Ards and Castlereagh Council areas. The Following Table provides information for Northern Ireland and the area covered by the Dundonald Grants Office:

2004/2005

	Completed DFGs	Expenditure
Northern Ireland	959	£9,683k
Dundonald	92	£923k

2005/2006

	Completed DFGs	Expenditure
Northern Ireland	1,047	£10,760k
Dundonald	114	£1,343k

2006/2007

	Completed DFGs	Expenditure
Northern Ireland	1,352	£12,544k
Dundonald	140	£1,737k

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 28 March 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Victims' and Survivors' Commissioners

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what its assessment is of the impact upon the delivery of PSA Target 7(6), in relation to the publication of a new strategy for victims and survivors, of the decision to appoint multiple victims' commissioners on 28 January 2008. (AQW 3556/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): We do not anticipate that the decision to appoint multiple Commissioners designate, instead of making a single appointment, will have any significant impact upon the publication of a new strategy for Victims and Survivors. We aim to publish a new strategy as soon as possible.

Victims' and Survivors' Commissioners

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what its assessment is of the impact upon the delivery of PSA Target 7(6), in relation to the creation of a Victims and Survivors Forum, of the decision to appoint multiple victims' commissioners on 28 January 2008. (AQW 3557/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We do not anticipate that our decision to appoint four Commissioners designate will have any impact in relation to delivering this target.

Trip to Brussels

Mr Easton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide details about their recent trip to Brussels. (AQO 1720/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

We travelled to Brussels on 9 January 2008, accompanied by the two junior Ministers, at the invitation of European Commission President José Manuel Barroso.

During this trip, we met with Regional Policy Commissioner Danuta Hübner, and discussed some of the practical arrangements for the work that will take place after the Commission Task Force completes its report. Commissioner Hübner made it clear that she regards the publication of the report as the start of the Task Force's work with us, and also the start of a process of long-term engagement in Europe for Northern Ireland. We need to learn how to get the most we can out of Europe, not just financially – though we thank Europe, and others, for their generosity – but also in terms of our policy interests.

We discussed the May Investment Conference and the possibility of the Commissioner's involvement. It is important that the investors we hope to attract during the conference can see that we are fully engaged and have the support of our wider European partners.

We met with the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso. We had a useful discussion about the rapid development of relationships since his visit last year and President Barroso emphasised the need for Northern Ireland to seek out and build relationships with other European regions that share our policy interests.

President Barroso was also interested to hear about the investment conference in May, and hoped to be able to contribute in some way and finally, we discussed the ongoing implementation of the Task Force, and in particular the high level political co-ordination, where we see a specific role for the junior Ministers.

Along with our colleague the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development we met the Agriculture and Rural Development Commissioner Fischer Boel to discuss a number of substantive issues including - the forthcoming CAP 'Healthcheck'.

Following a lunch hosted by the United Kingdom Permanent Representative to the EU, Kim Darroch, our final engagement was a meeting with Ireland's Permanent Representative to the EU, Bobby McDonagh and his staff. He reiterated his Government's full support for the work of the Taskforce and undertook to provide a single point of contact within the Irish administration for our officials in their dealings with Europe – this has now been done.

Finally, we should like to place on the record our appreciation for the support given to us by so many institutions within the EU and from the UK and Irish Governments.

Victims and Survivors

Mr Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm whether or not sufficient funding has been made available for victims and survivors. (AQO 1735/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The needs of victims and survivors are one of the highest priorities for this Executive. In the recent budget announcement we committed more than £33 million over the next three years which will support and make a real difference to the lives of victims and survivors. This includes an additional amount of £6 million which we secured following the consultation on the draft budget. This represents an increase of more than 100% over that committed in the three years since 2005/2006.

We recognise the pressures that those involved in the sector have been facing and we hope that this increase in spending will go some way to facilitate continuing work and to demonstrate the commitment of this administration to the issues facing victims and survivors.

Review of Parades

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm whether or not it supports the review of parades that was initiated under direct rule. (AQO 1685/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Responsibility for the Strategic Review of Parading, which was announced on 18 April 2007, lies with the Northern Ireland Office. We have met with Lord Ashdown, Chair of the Strategic Review, on 22 May and a further presentation was provided to us by members of the Review Body on 15 October 2007.

We understand the Review Body has continued to hold consultations, with a wide range of interests, and we await the outcome of these.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the work it has undertaken with the Minister of Education further to her announcement to the Assembly on 4 December in relation to post-primary transfer. (AQO 1662/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has not undertaken any work with the Minister of Education on the subject of post-primary transfer. However, the Minister of Education has briefed Executive colleagues on her proposals on a

number of occasions and the matter is the subject of ongoing discussion at the Executive.

Commissioner for Older People

Mr Brady asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to engage all relevant stakeholders when assessing the case for an independent commissioner for older people. (AQO 1747/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The review of the case for establishing an older people's commissioner initially included plans for two consultation events with key stakeholders in Belfast and Londonderry at which interested parties could comment on the possible role/remit of a commissioner.

The Committee of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister met with the consultants on 16th January 2008 at which Committee members highlighted their concern that only two consultations had been organised at this stage. Arrangements are now being made to organise an additional event at a rural location to provide a further opportunity for interested parties to submit their views on the possible role and remit of a commissioner.

EU Gender Goods and Services Directive

Mr Attwood asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm how and when it was advised of the decision by United Kingdom Ministers to implement the EU Gender Goods and Services directive; and to outline the reasons that were advanced for this course of action. (AQO 1686/08)

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. Barbara Follett, Parliamentary Under Secretary for GEO formally wrote to us on 17 December to confirm the decision to take the legislation forward on a UK-wide basis. The decision was taken to ensure compliance with the directive in full, and to ensure that compliance took place as soon as possible in order to minimise the risk of infraction proceedings.

Child Poverty

Mrs McGill asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration it has given to emulating the strategy devised by the Governments of Denmark and Finland in relation to reducing child poverty. (AQO 1746/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Tackling child poverty is an urgent priority for us and the junior Ministers, in line with their specific responsibility for children and young people. It is important to consider different approaches to tackling the problem and in particular to understand what has worked well in countries like Denmark and Finland where child poverty figures of around 3% are among the lowest in Europe.

Government policies on taxation, tax credits and family related benefits are some of the factors that affect child poverty rates and as these are set at a national level they are outside the competence of this administration. Nonetheless there are factors which we can influence at local level such as the quality of public services and the potential of people of working age to secure employment with a decent income.

During 2006, departmental officials worked closely with counterparts from other European countries studying the mainstreaming of social inclusion in public policies (www.europemsi.org). The lessons learned from this partnership approach will continue to inform the direction of future policy here.

Shared Future Policy

Mrs Long asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the steps it has taken, since the Assembly debates on the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget, in developing a policy on a Shared Future. (AQO 1760/08)

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 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. Work is currently ongoing to fund a wide range of projects aimed at increasing cohesion and integration.

Departmental Functions

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps it is taking to divest itself of departmental

responsibilities in order to develop the central co-ordinating functions of government. (AQO 1683/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The ranges of functions carried out by the Department are kept under constant scrutiny and the current efficiency review will ensure that the Department continues to be fit for purpose.

Asylum Cases

Ms Lo asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail what steps it is taking to influence the outcome of asylum cases being dealt with by the United Kingdom Home Office, that directly affect people living in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1757/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Immigration, including asylum, is an excepted matter under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and is the responsibility of the Home Office.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has made representations to the Home Office, and to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, in respect of three asylum seeker families under threat of deportation. While we recognise the need to have rules governing the granting of asylum, we would wish to see the application of common sense and common humanity in the interpretation and enforcement of these rules.

Officials liaise on an ongoing basis with the Home Office on a variety of immigration related matters.

Dual Membership of the Assembly and Parliament at Westminster

Mr Gardiner asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide a timescale for ending the practice of dual membership of the Assembly and Parliament at Westminster. (AQO 1682/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Disqualification for membership of the Assembly is a reserved matter under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and therefore not one for which the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has any direct responsibility.

A Shared Future — Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland

Mr Neeson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the current status of

the document 'A Shared Future - Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland'.
(AQO 1759/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

As we have stated on previous occasions, A Shared Future policy and strategic framework for good relations for Northern Ireland is an inherited policy from the previous administration.

OFMDFM is fully committed to building a shared and better future and a prosperous, peaceful and settled society.

Having considered progress made, we are currently working on detailed proposals for a programme of cohesion and integration, which we will bring forward to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister for consideration. Key objectives, actions and targets will be developed in the context of these proposals.

EU Gender Goods and Services Directive

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answer to AQW 1825/08, to detail the advice that was (i) sought; and (ii) given, in relation to whether or not the degree of flexibility available to (a) member states; and (b) devolved assemblies, allows for a greater number of exemptions from harassment clauses than those detailed in the proposals issued for consultation in the European Union Gender Goods and Services directive.
(AQW 4561/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The exemption proposals outlined in the EU Gender Goods and Services consultation document were considered to be the best way of meeting our obligations under the directive, and legal advice was taken into consideration in that process.

Further legal advice was sought, at the request of the First Minister, on the degree of flexibility available to member states, and devolved Administrations, to create further exemptions from the harassment clauses. The advice confirmed that there was no scope available for flexibility on this matter.

Children's Fund

Mrs Long asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail if all existing services funded through the children's fund should be placing staff on redundancy notice as of the beginning of March, as continuation funding has not been confirmed beyond 31 March 2008; what if any action has been taken to advise such programmes of the way forward and if the Department could outline

by what mechanisms, if any, such programmes can access the budget line for children and young people, incorporating the previous children's fund, recently announced by the junior Ministers, the main proportion of which appears to have now been mainstreamed within the various Departments?
(AQW 4778/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

As you are aware the children's fund will no longer exist beyond March 2008. This decision was made on the basis that if the individual projects supported are considered to be of significant value then the funding stream should be in the departments' programmes, rather than continuing to be managed through central funds.

Whilst the allocation of Departmental budgets remains at the discretion of individual Ministers, Ministerial colleagues have been urged to mainstream and protect funding for children and young people within their departmental budgets.

Junior Ministers are continuing to have discussions with relevant Ministers on the issue of services currently funded through the children's fund. Junior Ministers will respond to you in more detail when the way forward has been decided.

Should your query relate directly to specific programmes or projects, we would suggest that you should also contact the appropriate Minister.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Departmental Expenditure

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her Department's underspend in relation to (i) current expenditure; (ii) capital expenditure, in each of the last ten years.
(AQW 4644/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): The table attached sets out the information requested. This is based on information contained within the published accounts of the Department and its predecessor and covers all areas of departmental expenditure included in Estimates (ie expenditure within the Departmental Expenditure Limit, Annually Managed Expenditure and Notional Charges). For the years 1997-98 to 2000-01 the information has been extracted from the Annual Appropriation Accounts which were prepared on a cash basis. For the years 2001-02 to 2006-07 for consistency purposes the information has been

extracted from the Department's Annual Report and Accounts, which is prepared on a resource basis. In both cases outturn has been compared with the Spring Supplementary Estimates position. Explanations for the variances are contained within the various Accounts.

You should also be aware that, where appropriate, a significant amount of the under-spends were carried forward to the next financial year under End Year Flexibility arrangements and were therefore not lost to Agriculture and rural areas.

TABLE 1: LEVEL OF DARD UNDER-SPEND FOR YEARS 1997/98 TO 2001/02 USING APPROPRIATION ACCOUNTS

Year	Current Under-spend (£'000)	Capital Under-spend (£'000)
1997/98	2,269	(1,426)
1998/99	3,528	(1,333)
1999/00	11,078	(2,450)
2000/01	9,485	(1,407)

TABLE 2: LEVEL OF DARD UNDER-SPEND FOR YEARS 2001/02 TO 2006/07 USING RESOURCE ACCOUNTS

Year	Current Under-spend (£'000)	Capital Under-spend (£'000)
2001/02	33,045	2,662
2002/03	7,047	8,833
2003/04	32,056	(1,250)
2004/05	40,311	4,469
2005/06	55,897	6,228
2006/07	21,006	3,506

Figures in brackets represent an over-spending.

Dogs Destroyed

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of dogs destroyed as a result of biting humans, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 4723/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development does not have responsibility for these figures as these are collected and held by local Councils. Figures provided by Councils to DARD in relation to the number of incidents (attacks on humans) and destruction orders are set out in Table 1.

TABLE 1. NUMBERS OF DOG ATTACKS ON HUMANS 2003-2007 (FIGURES PROVIDED TO DARD BY LOCAL COUNCILS).

Year	Number of incidents	Destruction Orders
2003	697	13
2004	783	5
2005	772	8
2006	764	12
2007*	625	9
Total	3641	47

* Figures from January – September 2007

Access to High Mourne

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the funds that will be made available to upgrade the main access to the high Mourne through Tollymore Forest Park. (AQW 4731/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Access to the wider Mourne area from within Tollymore Forest Park is via the Ulster Way / Mourne Way. Overall responsibility for the Ulster Way and the provision of this type of wider access to the countryside falls to EHS and others who are largely funded by EHS.

The Ulster Way / Mourne Way entry / exit points, and their location within Tollymore Forest Park, have been agreed between Forest Service, EHS and local councils. A small portion of poor quality Ulster Way trail within Tollymore was abandoned recently in favour of an alternative route. This now follows an existing high quality forest trail and provides a much improved section of the Ulster Way. The route is fully way-marked and upgrading is not regarded as necessary.

Forest Service is in discussions with N.I. Tourist Board on the role that Tollymore Forest Park can play in improving access to the wider Mourne area. This process is being led by N.I. Tourist Board under the Mourne Signature Project.

Dangerous Dogs

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update on the review of the legislation in relation to dangerous dogs; and if she will make a statement. (AQW 4740/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Since I made my statement to the Assembly on

20 November 2007 on my plans to undertake a review of dangerous dogs and dog fighting legislation, my officials have been carrying out a scoping exercise on existing legislation with regard to all aspects of dog control, including dangerous dogs. This exercise has included examination of the wide range of comments made during the Assembly debate. It has also involved consideration of comments made in the past on the efficacy of current legislation.

My officials have also briefed the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee on the Review, and I welcome the helpful comments that have been received from the Committee. I have also raised the issue with my counterpart in the South, Mary Coughlan TD and my officials have discussed the matter with their counterparts in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in Dublin.

The review is ongoing. Once the scoping exercise is complete, I will consider a number of options, including what new legislation might be required and what it might cover.

Enforcement of the legislation is crucial to this review and many of the issues that have been raised prior to my announcement had been about public safety. I met senior PSNI representatives on Tuesday 22 January, when we discussed the role of the PSNI in enforcement of dog control and dangerous dogs legislation. This was a constructive and positive meeting in which a number of proposals were discussed that will form part of my considerations.

I also met local council representatives, including dog wardens, on Monday 25 February. This gave me the opportunity to hear at first hand their concerns. Council representatives also provided me with written presentations highlighting key issues for my consideration.

Council representatives welcomed my proposal to establish a Working Group to take forward a Memorandum of Understanding between councils and the PSNI on the enforcement of dangerous dogs legislation. Arrangements for the first meeting of this Working Group are well underway.

Plans are also underway for meetings with other stakeholders, including animal welfare representatives. I will consider the outcome of all my meetings, and the on-going review of existing legislation, as I seek to balance the need to examine the issues fully, with the requirement to complete the review as quickly as possible.

Official Visits

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail, by date and duration,

all visits she has made to each of the 18 constituencies since taking up her post. (AQW 4783/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The visits I have made to each of the 18 constituencies since taking my post are set out in the attached table.

AQW 4783/2008 DATE, DURATION AND CONSTITUENCY UP TO 10/03/2008

Date	Duration	Constituency
30/01/2008	4 hours	Belfast East
16/11/2007	5 hours	Belfast North
24/04/2008	1 hour	Belfast North
17/05/2007	1.5 hours	Belfast South
16/05/2007	6.5 hours	Belfast South
31/01/2008	1.45 hours	Belfast South
17/05/2007	1.45 hours	Belfast South
16/05/2007	0.5 hours	Belfast South
12/06/2007	2 hours	Belfast South
30/11/2007	2.15 hours	Belfast South
04/03/2008	2.45 hours	Belfast West
02/04/2008	1 hour	East Antrim
24/01/2008	1 hour	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
09/01/2008	2 hours	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
11/10/2007	0.30 hours	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
29/11/2007	1 hour	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
26/10/2007	1.30 hours	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
21/06/2007	1 hour	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
08/08/2007	3.30 hours	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
25/07/2007	3 hours	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
21/10/2007	1.30 hours	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
27/06/2007	2 hours	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
09/01/2008	1 hour	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
12/10/2007	1 hour	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
28/06/2007	1 hour	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
09/01/2008	1 hour	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
27/06/2007	1 hour	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
09/05/2007	1 hour	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
14/11/2007	2 hours	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
26/09/2008	2 hours	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
04/04/2008	1.30 hours	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
06/12/2007	1 hour	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
01/05/2007	1 hour	Foyle

Date	Duration	Constituency
21/11/2007	4 hours	Foyle
14/11/2007	2 hours	Foyle
20/10/2007	4 hours	Foyle
20/09/2007	3 hours	Foyle
27/02/2008	1 hour	Lagan Valley
08/06/2007	2 hours	Lagan Valley
23/01/2008	2 hour	Londonderry East
07/11/2007	0.45 hours	Mid Ulster
19/09/2007	2 hours	Mid Ulster
05/03/2008	1.30 hours	Mid Ulster
25/07/2007	0.45 hours	Mid Ulster
26/07/2007	1.45 hours	Mid Ulster
Date	Duration	Constituency
03/10/2007	1.30 hours	Mid Ulster
23/01/2007	2 hours	Mid Ulster
23/08/2007	3 hours	Mid Ulster
03/10/2007	3 hours	Mid Ulster
23/04/2008	2 hours	Mid Ulster
28/06/2007	2 hours	Mid Ulster
05/03/2008	0.45 hours	Mid Ulster
22/08/2007	5 hours	Mid Ulster
12/12/2007	5.50 hours	Newry & Armagh
01/11/2007	1 hour	Newry & Armagh
15/11/2007	1.30 hours	North Antrim
28/02/2007	1 hour	North Antrim
18/04/2007	1.30 hours	North Antrim
04/10/2007	0.45 hour	North Antrim
21/06/2007	0.30 hour	North Antrim
21/11/2007	2 hours	North Antrim
17/04/2007	2 hours	South Antrim
19/04/2007	5 hours	South Antrim
24/07/2007	1 hour	South Antrim
04/10/2007	1 hour	South Antrim
26/04/2007	2.45 hours	South Down
31/05/2007	2.30 hours	South Down
26/04/2007	1.45 hours	South Down
05/12/2007	8.30 hours	Strangford
25/01/2007	1.30 hours	Strangford
21/02/2008	2 hours	Strangford

Date	Duration	Constituency
09/05/2007	1.15 hours	Strangford
16/07/2007	1 hour	Strangford
23/02/2008	4 hours	Upper Bann
13/06/2007	1 hour	Upper Bann
08/03/2008	2 hours	Upper Bann
30/04/2007	2 hours	Upper Bann
05/03/2008	2 hours	Upper Bann
13/06/2007	2.10 hours	Upper Bann
08/11/2007	2 hours	Upper Bann
14/11/2007	0.50 hours	West Tyrone
28/01/2008	2.30 hours	West Tyrone
20/09/2007	0.45 hours	West Tyrone
27/06/2007	1 hour	West Tyrone
14/11/2007	3.10 hours	West Tyrone
01/11/2007	1.30 hours	West Tyrone
06/12/2007	1 hour	West Tyrone
01/11/2007	1.30 hours	West Tyrone
16/01/2008	2 hours	West Tyrone
01/11/2007	1.30 hours	West Tyrone
28/09/2007	1.30 hours	West Tyrone

Newspaper Expenditure

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her department's expenditure on (i) newspapers; (ii) magazines; and (iii) periodicals, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4796/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The following table details the amount spent on newspapers, magazines and periodicals by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and its Agencies in each of the last three financial years.

	Newspapers £	Magazines £	Periodicals £
2004/05	10,025.68	9,413.03	66,085.38
2005/06	11,338.65	9,027.54	75,301.62
2006/07	11,439.65	8,757.58	78,491.82

Note. These figures include the Departmental spend on publications used by staff and students for the delivery of education in the three College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise campuses. The above figures also include estimates for the Science Service which was formerly part of the core Department until April 2006 when it became a Non-Departmental Public Body (the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute).

Equine Training

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to continue the current range of equine training, given the high numbers of equine students at Enniskillen College of Agriculture, following the department's withdrawal from the Necarne campus. (AQW 4834/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department is currently undertaking an appraisal to consider options for the delivery of the current range of equine education programmes in Co Fermanagh. The outcome of this appraisal will inform the decision for withdrawal from Necarne and the need for investment in additional facilities.

Communications Course

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what plans she has for discussions with Assembly Members in relation to the proposed withdrawal of the Communications course at Loughry College. (AQW 4835/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have already discussed issues in relation to the proposal to withdraw the Communications course at Loughry Campus in the Assembly.

I have also met with a delegation of Loughry students and have listened to their views on this proposal and have asked my officials to consult with key stakeholders. Firm decisions will only be taken when implications have been assessed.

Communications Course

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of requests for meetings, to discuss the proposed withdrawal of her department from the Communications course at Loughry, that she has received from Assembly Members. (AQW 4836/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have had one request from an MLA for a meeting to discuss the proposal to withdraw the Communications programmes at CAFRE's Loughry Campus. This request has been to meet with the Member, in this case, Tom Elliott MLA and Loughry students.

Departmental Policies

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what screening is

undertaken on new departmental policies to ensure they are not overly bureaucratic. (AQW 4837/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The undertaking of screening for both Equality and Regulatory Impact Assessments is common practice for all new Government policies. In addition to ensuring a particular policy or piece of legislation contains no adverse impact on the equality of opportunity for any of the nine groups recognised under Section 75, we are mindful of the costs and benefits it may contain.

The outworking of these processes is therefore to evaluate the likely equality considerations and economic implications on the introduction of proposals or policies and ensure that unnecessary bureaucracy is removed.

I recognise the significance of this issue to all farming families. Since becoming Minister, in association with Environment Minister, Arlene Foster, I established an independent review to examine all DARD/DOE regulations that impose an administrative burden on the agri-food sector, particularly farmers.

This Panel will review Departmental procedures in place to assess the administrative burden associated with new policies and make recommendations, if appropriate, for the strengthening of current procedures.

The aim of the review is "To improve the way in which DARD and DOE operate to meet their regulatory policy objectives and EU obligations, so that compliance by the agri-food sector is facilitated and the cost of compliance is reduced."

Forest Area

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the amount of forest area in Northern Ireland, broken down by county. (AQW 4838/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The forested area managed by my Department and the area of grant aided privately owned woodland in the North of Ireland is detailed below:

County	Combined state managed and grant aided privately owned forested area to nearest 500 Ha	% of land cover by County
Antrim	13,000	4
Armagh	3,500	3
Down	6,500	3
Fermanagh	19,000	10

County	Combined state managed and grant aided privately owned forested area to nearest 500 Ha	% of land cover by County
Derry	13,500	6
Tyrone	20,500	6

Animal Carcasses

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the responsibility her department has in relation to the removal of animal carcasses from the sides of public roads.
(AQW 4894/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The EU Animal By-Products Regulation No. 1774/2002 banned the burial of fallen animal carcasses throughout the EU. They must instead be incinerated, rendered, or used in hunt kennels for the feeding to dogs. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) made the Animal By-Products Regulations (NI) 2003 to implement the EU Regulation here. These provide enforcement powers for DARD, Department of the Environment and District Council inspectors.

Where illegal dumping of fallen stock occurs, and where the owner of the carcase cannot be traced, the land owner is responsible for disposal. The land owner could be the Road Service, Rivers Agency, Forest Service, or a private landowner, depending on the circumstances. Where land ownership is in question, or where an on-going health risk remains unresolved, District Councils have Environmental Health responsibilities.

Public Appointments

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the number of people that have been appointed under public appointments by her department since the restoration of devolution; and (ii) the number that were (a) female; and (b) elected councillors.
(AQW 4964/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and its Agencies has appointed 12 people under public appointments since the restoration of devolution, 2 of whom were female and none of whom were elected councillors.

Integrated Animal Control System

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of Integrated Animal Control System applications had penalties imposed on them due to duplicate fields in 2005; 2006; and 2007.
(AQW 4965/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As at 13 March 2008, financial penalty has been applied in 1,168 cases for the 2005 scheme year, in 62 cases for the 2006 scheme year and in 58 cases for the 2007 scheme year.

New Entrants Scheme

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of applications to the New Entrants Scheme that have been approved to date.
(AQW 4966/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: By 12th March 2008, 143 applicants had been approved for financial assistance under the New Entrants Scheme. A further 82 applicants have been advised that they are eligible for the scheme on completion of a viable business plan and a personal development plan.

New Entrants Scheme

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the action she is taking, apart from the New Entrants Scheme, to encourage young farmers to remain in the industry.
(AQW 4968/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department, primarily through the Development Service of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) provides support and assistance to those farmers of all age groups who wish to develop their farm business and commit to a future in the industry.

CAFRE's team of Development Advisers, who are located throughout NI, work with farmers through delivery of tailored Development Plans for their businesses. Through this process business objectives and development needs are identified and the appropriate support agreed. Development Advisers provide support to these farmers through delivery of:

- Benchmarking which enables farmers to compare their business / farm enterprise performance with other similar businesses.
- Knowledge and Technology Transfer – through a diverse range of projects, CAFRE encourages

farmers to adopt world-class, leading edge technology.

- Training – CAFRE has developed a wide portfolio of short courses and Challenge programmes to meet the competence development needs of those within the industry.

For those young people wishing to pursue a career in farming, CAFRE also provides Further and Higher education programmes in agriculture. Courses ranging from NVQ level 2 to Honours degree level, (which is delivered in partnership with Queen's University, Belfast), are available at CAFRE's Greenmount Campus in Antrim. The NVQ part-time programmes are also available at CAFRE's Enniskillen Campus.

Official Visits

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the protocols she follows in informing MLAs that she will be visiting their respective constituencies. (AQW 4990/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: On the day before the event and e-mail is to be sent to all MLA's in the Constituency area that I will be visiting by my Private Office. This e-mail informs the MLA's that I will be in their constituency area am or pm and if they require more details to contact my Private Office.

Botulism in Cattle

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of botulism cases notified to her department in the last 10 years. (AQW 4994/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The number of suspect botulism cases received through AFBI/VSD from 1998 to the present can be found below. The number of confirmed positive cases is also given. It should be noted that the samples received were tested using the mouse bioassay as set out by the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, U.S.A. This is recognised as the gold standard test for diagnosis of this condition.

Year	Number of suspect botulism cases	Number of cases confirmed as positive using mouse bioassay
1998	5	0
1999	20	1
2000	17	0
2001	46	0

Year	Number of suspect botulism cases	Number of cases confirmed as positive using mouse bioassay
2002	101	14
2003	138	35
2004	59	12
2005	100	13
2006	73	11
2007	77	12
2008 to date	17	4
Total	653	102 (15.6%)

Botulism in Cattle

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her plans to categorise botulism as a notifiable disease. (AQW 4996/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have no plans to categorise botulism as a notifiable disease at this time. There are a number of reasons why this is so.

First, any risk of the type of botulism that affects cattle being transmitted to humans is minimal. Second, botulism is not an epizootic disease and does not spread from one animal to another. Therefore botulism cannot be controlled by livestock movement controls or eradication schemes.

The Department issued advisory leaflets on botulism to all farmers in 2003, 2004 and 2005. Posters are also on display at local DARD veterinary offices, agricultural offices, auction marts and UFU offices to alert farmers to the dangers of botulism to their animals and advise them of appropriate control measures.

There is now wider awareness amongst farmers of the disease, of the risk factors involved and of the benefit of vaccination as a control tool. An effective vaccine against botulism in cattle can be obtained through private veterinary practitioners. This vaccine has been very successful in helping to control botulism in cattle here.

Slurry-Spreading Activities

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the action she is taking to ensure that all slurry tanks and slurry spreading activities are monitored, so that sensitive

rivers are not at risk of pollution; and to confirm that her department is compliant with all European Union requirements to aid the protection of salmonid stocks.
(AQW 4998/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department is taking a series of actions to reduce the risk of river pollution from the storage and spreading of slurry. These include advice and training, grant support and regulation.

During the period 2001 – 2007, DARD Countryside Management Branch staff carried out over 14,500 pollution control and waste management advisory visits on farms. These are designed to increase farmer competence in handling slurry, manure and other farm wastes, thereby minimising the possibility of a pollution incident.

All applicants to DARD's agri-environment schemes are given farm waste management advice. Further farm waste management workshops are provided for farmers by CAFRE. Countryside Management Branch also provide pollution control advisory visits to farmers referred by The Department of the Environment's (DOE) Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) following a pollution incident from a farm source.

Through the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme (FNMS), DARD is providing very significant capital grant support for improved slurry and manure storage facilities. Some 4500 projects are being progressed under the FNMS with an estimated total investment of approximately £200 million.

My Department has worked jointly with DOE to implement The Nitrates Action Programme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006. These set controls on farming practice to reduce the risk of water pollution. Controls include a closed period for the spreading of slurry and a minimum slurry storage requirement on farms.

The Control of Pollution (Silage, Slurry and Agricultural Fuel Oil) Regulations (NI), introduced by DOE in 2003, aim to minimise the risk of water pollution from the storage of silage, slurry and agricultural fuel oils. These specify standards for the construction of slurry tanks.

EHS is responsible for the regulation of a range of agricultural activities that may impact on water quality. In 2007, EHS inspected over 1000 farms in relation to compliance with legislation and the investigation of pollution incidents.

EHS is responsible for designating rivers to protect their salmon stocks. To date, EHS has designated three Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) in rivers that have salmonid interests. Three Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) that are coincident with these

ASSI have been designated under the EU Habitats Directive for their Atlantic Salmon interests.

Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of farmers who have completed their 10 year Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme and have been accepted into a new Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme in (i) Antrim Coast, Glens and Rathlin Island; (ii) Sperrins; (iii) Mourne and Slieve Croob; (iv) Slieve Gullion; and (v) Fermanagh and Erne Lakelands.

(AQW 5026/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The numbers of farmers who have completed their 10 year Environmentally Sensitive Areas scheme and have been accepted into a new Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme in the five Environmentally Sensitive Areas are:

- (i) Antrim Coast, Glens and Rathlin Island – 393
- (ii) Sperrins – 576
- (iii) Mourne and Slieve Croob – 378
- (iv) Slieve Gullion – 70
- (v) Fermanagh and Erne Lakelands - 521

Biodiversity Action Plan

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of whether or not she will achieve the targets within the 2010 Biodiversity Action Plan, in particular maintaining the extent of 8380 hectares of native woodland, restoration of 180 hectares of planted ancient woodland, and expansion of woodland by 460 hectares.

(AQW 5033/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I would refer you to my previous answer to AQW 2801/08 to Mr John McCallister, the Member for South Down, published in the Official Record on Friday 25 January 2008, where I clearly set out the position.

Aid for Energy Crops

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail, for each of the last three years, (i) the number of farm businesses in receipt of Aid for Energy crops; and (ii) the total area of energy crops grown.
(AQW 5039/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: In the 2005 scheme year, 19 applications were made to the Aid for Energy Crop Scheme and a total of 239.82 hectares were eligible for payment.

In 2006, 43 applications were received and a total of 418.48 hectares were eligible for payment.

In 2007, 54 applications were made and a total of 736.12 hectares were eligible for payment. As the European Union ceiling of 2 million hectares for energy crops was exceeded this required a coefficient reduction of 0.70337 to be applied and this reduced the total area eligible for payment to 517.76 hectares.

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the progress made towards the introduction of the Northern Ireland Countryside Management Scheme. (AQW 5040/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Considerable progress is being made with the development of the new and improved Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS).

Draft legislation is at an advanced stage and it is proposed to be considered by the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee on the 8 April. Development of scheme options and literature are currently being finalised and work on associated computer programmes is ongoing. A programme of promoting the scheme to prospective applicants is also being prepared. The anticipated opening date is late spring/early summer 2008.

Land Grants

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the amount of land that has been set aside for grants purposes in (i) 2006; (ii) 2007; and (iii) 2008. (AQW 5043/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: For 2006, 573 applicants to the Single Farm Payment Scheme, declared land which was in set aside. A total of 1,923.58 hectares was determined as eligible for payment.

For 2007, 595 applicants declared land which was in set aside. By 18 March 2008, a total of 1,911.53 hectares had been determined as eligible for payment in respect of 2007.

The figures for 2008 will be similar but will not be known exactly until 2008 applications have been received. Declarations by farmers in respect of the 2008 scheme year are due to be made on the 2008 Single Application Form. The application window,

for 2008 applications to be accepted without penalty, closes on 15 May 2008.

Farm Nutrients Management Scheme

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail who set the upper limits on items in the Farm Nutrients Management Scheme of (i) cost of tank, pounds per cubic metre; and (ii) cost of slats, pounds per square metre, and how these costs were formulated. (AQW 5081/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Reasonable costs for a range of actual cost items were determined by a Chartered Quantity Surveyor.

For above and below ground tanks the reasonable costs are formulated on the basis of the total volume of the tank.

For slats, reasonable costs are determined per square metre.

Single Farm Payment

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of officials required to process a single farm payment application. (AQW 5105/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: A total of 39,041 applications were submitted under the 2007 Single Farm Payment Scheme. Single Farm Payment (SFP) Branch in Orchard House is responsible for the administration of the SFP scheme. To comply with European Council regulations, SFP Branch is required to carry out a range of validation checks to verify the eligibility claims before a payment can be released. During February 2008, a total of 51 staff within Single Farm Payment Branch were involved specifically in validation and payment processing activity of Single Payment claims.

Single Farm Payment

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the average length of time it takes for a single farm payment application to be processed, from the date the application is received to the date the payment is made. (AQW 5108/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: European Council Regulations rules permit full Single Farm Payments to commence from 1 December in the year of application and require 96.15% of the annual budget to be paid by 30 June of the following

year, if the Department is to avoid late payment penalties.

Payments may be made only on fully verified claims. Administrative checks are required on all claims, and on-farm checks are required on at least 5% of claims, to verify eligibility and claim details. On-farm checks, on at least 1% of applications, verify compliance with statutory requirements on issues such as the environment and animal identification and welfare

Validation checks can identify a variety of queries which have to be fully reconciled before a payment can be authorised. Payments on individual claims are released as soon as verification checks and any necessary recalculations to take account of the findings have been completed. The time required to finalise a particular claim depends on the issues, if any, involved in the individual case.

For the 2007 scheme year, 80.9% of applications were paid by the end of December 2007, 85.7% by the end of January 2008 and 90.9% by the end February 2008. It is anticipated that at least 94% of applications will be finalised by 31 March 2008.

Bluetongue

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the steps she has taken to ensure that there is a sufficient supply of vaccinations to tackle a possible outbreak of bluetongue. (AQW 5109/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As you will be aware, under EU rules vaccination for bluetongue is only permitted once the disease is confirmed to be circulating in a country, and then only within the protection zone. Thankfully we are not in that position.

You will also be aware that no vaccine is currently authorised for use against BTV8, the strain of bluetongue currently affecting Northern Europe and England. Vaccine will become available later this year and we are currently carefully assessing the benefits or otherwise of ordering vaccine. Until the products have received authorisation for use there are many uncertainties including how many doses will be required, the effectiveness of the vaccine and the shelf life of the product.

Defra have ordered 22.5 m doses of vaccine for use in England and Wales. Scotland are considering ordering vaccine. The North, however, as a separate epidemiological unit has different priorities and at the minute my priority is to keep the disease out.

If and when the veterinary risk assessment indicated that it would be prudent to order vaccine we will seek to do so. We have been part of detailed

negotiations with Britain that have led to the production of a UK vaccination strategy. While setting out general principles, the strategy allows the North to consider the specific needs we may have given our geographical separation from Britain. My staff and I are also in dialogue with counterparts in the Department of Fisheries and Food (DAFF) in Dublin on this issue.

Industry stakeholders, through the bluetongue strategy Group, have been assisting veterinary and policy staff in the formulation of policy in this area.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Newspaper Spending

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount his department has spent on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in each of the last three years. (AQW 4850/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure incurred the following expenditure on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in the last three years:

2004-05	£3,413.88
2005-06	£3,474.85
2006-07	£3,355.92

Public Appointments

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the number of people that have been appointed under public appointments by his department since the restoration of devolution; and (ii) the number that were (a) female; and (b) elected councillors. (AQW 4962/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since devolution DCAL has made fifty one public appointments. Appointments have been made in line with guidance set out by the Commissioner for Public Appointments in Northern Ireland (OCPA NI). Fifteen of these appointments have been female and one has been an elected councillor.

Intermediate Football

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the finance available for Health

and Safety improvements for first and second division and intermediate football. (AQW 5059/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Responsibility for financing health and safety improvements at first and second division and intermediate football grounds rests, in the first instance, with the owners of the grounds. Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), however, is currently considering how it will allocate its recently announced capital budget across sport. Decisions on the finance available for health and safety improvements will be taken by SNI once this process is completed.

Official Visits

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the protocols he follows in informing MLAs that he will be visiting their respective constituencies. (AQW 5078/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: MLAs and MPs are informed of any visit to their respective constituency by my Private Office not less than 24 hours in advance of the visit.

EDUCATION

Future Capital Projects

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education to detail what guidance is being given to schools wishing to advance future capital projects. (AQW 4220/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): To be considered eligible for major works funding requires an assessment that the condition and suitability of the school building is such as to require investment, and that an economic appraisal which assesses the options for meeting the accommodation needs has been approved by the department.

As we implement an area-based planning approach, it will also be necessary to clearly identify how proposed provision will fit with the anticipated future needs of an area. My statement to the Assembly on 4 March set out my proposals for local groups to take forward area-based planning in the post-primary sector this year. The Executive's Investment Strategy published in January stated that from 2012, we would commence a broader programme of schools modernisation, based firmly on cross-sector area plans.

Thug mé cuntas imlíne i mo ráiteas deireanach faoi na príomheilimintí a bheidh ann sna míonna atá amach romhainn sa chur chuige pleanála maidir

le soláthar iar-bhunoideachais bunaithe ar limistéir. Rachfar i mbun comhairliúcháin ag deireadh na bliana faoi na pleananna limistéar críochnaithe.

I outlined in my recent statement the main elements of the approach to area-based planning for post primary provision in the coming months, with a consultation on the completed area plans at the end of the year.

Irish-Language Schools

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education whether or not she will (i) carry out an urgent review into substandard and cramped temporary classrooms in Irish-language schools; and (ii) take steps to address problems such as dampness, leaking roofs, and disrepair in mobile classrooms. (AQW 4257/08)

The Minister of Education: The conditions in many Irish medium schools are unacceptable. I have visited many of them and am very concerned at the current state of the accommodation in many cases. My officials have been liaising with Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta on the accommodation issues at the Irish medium schools. I also had a meeting on 5 March with representatives from the Comhairle Na Gaelscolaíochta

where the accommodation issues were discussed.

Tá ceist na cóiríochta do Ghaelscoileanna á breithniú i gcomhthéacs an Athbhreithnithe ar Bheartas ar Ghaelscolaíocht.

The issue of accommodation for Irish medium schools is being considered in the context of the Irish Medium Policy Review.

Suicide Awareness Programmes

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Education to outline the strategies her department has in place to raise awareness of the issue of suicide among young people; and to detail (i) the suicide awareness programmes supported by her department; and (ii) the amount of funding allocated to each programme. (AQW 4410/08)

The Minister of Education: The revised curriculum, being phased in from September 2007, will better equip young people to deal with the challenges they face in life. It includes a new area of Personal Development & Mutual Understanding (PDMU) at primary and Learning for Life and Work (LLW) at post-primary, which provides opportunities to promote positive mental and emotional health among young people. As part of this development, schools can include awareness raising around the issue

of suicide and prevention through work to enhance self esteem and manage emotions.

In September 2007, work began on a pupils emotional health and well being programme in post primary schools. The agreed Programme will be expected to address how a pupil's emotional health and wellbeing is promoted by the school, what support systems are available to support a pupil under stress and what support is available to a school in the event of a crisis. The focus will be on positive prevention by building coping skills in children and young people and will complement the personal development strand of the curriculum. Although the initial focus is on post-primary schools, it is expected that the outcomes can be adapted through time for the primary and special sectors and that the resulting programme will have more general application in developing and supporting pastoral care systems in schools. In the recent budget announcement an additional £2.5 million over the next three years has been made available to make a start on a programme to promote pupils' emotional health and well being in the primary and special education sectors including £100,000 in 08/09 to build on the learning and outcomes from the post primary programme.

The Department has been actively encouraging schools to improve pupil behaviour and, among other things, to address the problem of bullying. In recent years the Department has issued a range of guidance to schools on bullying which offers advice on the problem and how to develop a whole school approach to tackling the issue.

School authorities must ensure their discipline policies specifically include measures to prevent bullying among pupils; and any changes that school authorities make to their discipline policies must be the subject of consultation with registered pupils and their parents.

The effectiveness of an individual school's discipline policy is monitored through the regular cycle of school inspections undertaken by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). If deficiencies are identified, these should be corrected as part of follow up from the inspection. As part of this exercise the Education and Training Inspectorate seek the views of a number of parents, via a questionnaire, on their perceptions of various aspects of pastoral care, including how effectively the school staff deal with bullying.

The Department works with the Anti Bullying Forum to promote best practice across schools in tackling all aspects of bullying and to provide appropriate advice and guidance and funds a Regional Co-ordinator post and programme activities.

Tá straitéis Frith-Bhulaíochta forbartha ag Fóram Frith-Bhulaíochta. Áirítear ar phríomheilimintí phlean straitéiseach an Fhórait forbairt, forfheidhmiú agus chur chun cinn samhlacha dea-chleachtais, comhpháirtíochtaí tuismitheoirí agus láithreán gréasáin a fhorbairt, agus seachtain bhliantúil frithbhulaíochta.

The NIABF has developed a 3-year Anti-Bullying strategy. The main elements of the Forum's strategic plan includes development, implementation and promotion of models of good practice, developing parental partnerships, website development and an annual anti-bullying week.

Vulnerable Children

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the steps she is taking to ensure that vulnerable children are given education and employment opportunities. (AQW 4454/08)

The Minister of Education: My vision is that each and every child will realise their full potential and leave school with appropriate qualifications and be equipped to succeed in adulthood.

We are seeking to achieve this through measures such as the revised curriculum, our new school improvement policy and a revised literacy and numeracy policy. Related policies are being developed to support children with barriers to learning including those with special educational needs, English as an additional language and alternative education provision. It will be important that when these policies are in place, they provide a basis for action at school level.

Within school, support for pupils is provided through the Independent Schools Counselling Service, anti-bullying measures and the development of a Pupil's Emotional Health and Well-being Programme to develop coping skills in children and young people. Life Skills Training Programmes are provided to young people with statements of special education need to improve self help and independent living and Education Transition Co-ordinators work with statutory and other agencies to support the transition process from school to adult life.

Chuaigh mo Roinnse agus an Roinn Fostaíochta agus Foghlama i gcomhairle le déanaí faoi chomhstraitéis maidir le comhstraitéis faoi Oideachas Gairme, Comhairle agus Treorú dar teideal 'Ullmhú don Rath'.

My Department and the Department for Employment and Learning have recently consulted on a joint strategy for Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance entitled 'Preparing for Success'.

This strategy aims to support better informed decision-making, leading to more effective career planning and through this to increased participation in education, training and employment and includes proposals to address the needs of young people and adults vulnerable to social exclusion.

Teachers Moving

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the progress made in relation to removing obstacles that prevent teachers moving between education sectors. (AQW 4492/08)

The Minister of Education: Since the inception of fair employment legislation in 1976, teachers have been exempt from protection against discrimination on the grounds of religious belief. This exemption originated from the desire to protect the diversity of ethos in the education sectors.

Tá Oifig an Chead-Aire agus an Leas-Chéad-Aire (OFMDFM) ag obair faoi láthair ar Bhille Singil um Chomhionannas chun nua-shonrú agus comhchuibhiú a dhéanamh ar an reachtaíocht in aghaidh leithcheala agus um chomhionannas i dTuaisceart Éireann agus iad a leathnú más gá é sin.

The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) is working currently on a Single Equality Bill to harmonise, update and extend, where appropriate, anti-discrimination and equality legislation in the North of Ireland. Once the proposals in this Bill are published, the Department of Education will consult stakeholders and interest groups to assess their views on this exemption.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in (i) special schools - severe learning difficulty; (ii) mainstream primary and post-primary schools; and (iii) other forms of educational provision, broken down by Education and Library Board. (AQW 4555/08)

The Minister of Education: Is mar seo a leanas atá an fhaisnéis a hiarradh.

The information requested is as follows.

PUPILS' WITH ATTENTION-DEFICIT DISORDER (ADD) OR ATTENTION-DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD) 2007/08

School type	Education and Library Board					Total
	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SELB	SELB	
Primary schools ^{2,3}	208	102	185	260	206	961
Post primary schools ³	207	107	112	278	287	991
SLD Special schools ⁴	*	#	23	12	14	61
Other ⁵ - MLD Special schools	67	21	15	53	0	156
Pre-schools	*	0	*	*	*	8
Nursery schools	6	0	*	*	*	13

Source: NI school census.

Notes:

1. It is a possibility that some pupils at SEN Stages 1 and 2 with this condition may not have been recorded.
 2. Includes children in nursery, reception and Year 1 – 7 classes.
 3. Includes pupils in mainstream classes and special units.
 4. Includes pupils who attend schools that cater for both MLD and SLD.
 5. Excludes Alternative Education Providers, Independent schools and hospital schools.
- * Relates to less than 5 pupils.
Means figure has been treated under rules of disclosure.

Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the membership of the board of the Middletown Autism Centre; (ii) the expertise of each member of the board, in relation to Autistic Spectrum Disorder; (iii) how the board was appointed; and (iv) who made the appointments. (AQW 4616/08)

The Minister of Education: The Board of Directors of the Middletown Centre for Autism Ltd comprises the following 10 members:

Chairperson - appointed by Department of Education and Science (DES) is Laurence Crowley a former Governor of the Bank of Ireland and a Director of a number of Irish companies.

The four DES Directors are:

- Dermot Ryan, Principal Officer, Office for Disability and Mental Health, Department for Health and Children.
- Breandán Ó Murchú, a retired Divisional Inspector of Schools with the Department of Education and Science. He was a member of the DES Task Force

on Autism, which produced its report in 2001 and was also a member of the Department of Education's (DE) Task Group on Autism, which produced its report in 2002.

- Leo Kinsella, the Local Health Manager with the Health Service Executive for the Cavan/Monaghan area, and is responsible for all primary, community and continuing care services in the two counties. He has held a number of senior managerial appointments in the Health Sector.
- Goretta Newell, the former principal of St Patrick's Boys National School, Hollypark, Co. Dublin, Schools Programme manager with Special Olympics Ireland and a Board member of Ballyowen Meadows Special School, which is under the auspices of Beechpark Services for children with Autism.

These members were appointed by the Minister for Education and Science under their procedures.

Vice-chairperson – appointed by Department of Education is Donal Flanagan OBE, Chief Executive of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. He has experience of special educational needs during his employment as Education Officer with SEELB.

The four DE Directors are:

- Professor Mary Hanratty CBE, a recently retired Director of Nursing and Midwifery Education for the Southern and Eastern Health and Social Services Boards where she was involved in developing education programmes for children and young people with autism spectrum disorders (ASD).
- Harry Mullan is retired. He has experience of addressing the needs of children with special needs through his work on education and health boards.
- Ethel Ruddock has a background in education and she was responsible for training and support for new Principals, Vice-Principals, School Senior Management Teams and Boards of Governors and Beginning Teachers in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area. Through this work she developed a considerable understanding of the needs of children with ASDs and their teachers.
- Daphne O'Kane, a retired Principal has extensive experience of working with children with ASDs including when she was Head of pre-school services for children with special education needs in Bromley Education Department and through her membership of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal.

These members were appointed in 2007 by the then Minister for Education following a public appointments exercise carried out by the Department of Education and monitored by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (NI).

Ba iad an dá Roinn a cheap baill an Bhoird agus rinneadar é sin ar an mbunús go mbeadh daoine éagsúla air a bheadh taithí acu ar na réimsí seo a leanas: uathachas, oideachas speisialta, cúram sláinte, airgeadas, acmhainní daonna agus bainistiú agus pleanáil gnó.

The Board members were appointed by both Departments on the basis that the Board comprised a range of individuals with experience in the following areas: autism, special education, health care, finance, human resources, business management and planning. This was to ensure that the Board had the breadth of experience to meet the many challenges involved in establishing a new north/south educational organisation.

Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to detail, for each year since 2002, the amount of money spent on (i) capital costs; (ii) revenue funding; and (iii) other costs, in relation to the Middletown Autism Project; and to further detail the staff currently employed and their salaries. (AQW 4618/08)

The Minister of Education: Féach ar an tábla thíos ar a bhfuil an fhaisnéis atá ag teastáil chun codanna i, ii agus iii de do cheist a fhreagairt.

Please see the following table with the information required for parts i, ii and iii of your question.

For the final part of your question regarding salaries of staff employed at the Centre, I cannot divulge actual salaries as these are personal information covered under the Data Protection Act.

The salary bands for the current posts are:

- Chief Executive Officer – SCP* 68-73
£54,534-£59,040;
- Head of Research and Development - SCP 64-67
£51,189-£53,673;
- Head of Learning Support and Assessment - SCP 64-67
£51,189-£53,673;
- Head of Corporate Services - SCP 64-67
£51,189-£53,673;
- Caretaker/Maintenance Officer – SCP 22-25
£18,450-£20,235;
- and a Grounds Operative (part-time) – SCP 9-11
£13,062-£14,197.

The Centre also employs 2 temporary Administration Staff employed through a recruitment agency and a part-time Cleaner however as these posts do not have an applicable scale their wages cannot be divulged.

* SCP – Spinal Column Point

Year	Type	Amount
2002/03	Revenue	£25,615.00
	Capital	£0.00
	Other	£29,454.19
	Total	£55,069.19
2003/04	Revenue	£141,098.79
	Capital	£0.00
	Other	£40,477.59
	Total	£181,576.38
2004/05	Revenue	£176,272.68
	Capital - Purchase	£1,500,000.00
	Other	£52,922.49
	Total	£1,729,195.17
2005/06	Revenue	£56,303.86
	Capital	£0.00
	Other	£47,658.58
	Total	£103,962.44
2006/07	Revenue	£84,277.19
	Capital	£0.00
	Other	£54,945.97
	Total	£139,223.16
2007/08 To date	Revenue	£355,452.78
	Capital	£74,831.25
	Other	£51,534.88
	Total	£481,818.91

Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the consultations that were carried out by the Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism, to assess the needs among the community in (i) Northern Ireland; and (ii) the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 4713/08)

The Minister of Education: The Chief Executive of the Middletown Centre for Autism has provided me with the following information:

A consultation exercise was carried out in December 2007 and January 2008. The purpose of this consultation was both to inform and invite comments regarding how the proposed services could best be delivered by the Centre. The outturn of the consultation exercise will ultimately be the production of the corporate plan and annual business plans for the Centre and the development of service provision that meets the needs of stake-

holders and the objectives Department of Education and The Department of Education and Science.

Rinneadh 15 léiriúchán san iomlán (5 cinn sa Tuaisceart - ceann i gach limistéar Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne - 8 i nDeisceart na hÉireann agus 2 cheann ag Coillidh Chanannáin), agus bhí 296 dhuine i láthair ag na léiriúcháin.

In total 15 presentations were made (5 in the North – one in each Education & Library Board area - 8 in the South of Ireland and 2 at Middletown), a total of 296 individuals attended the presentations.

Newspaper Expenditure

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to detail her department's expenditure on (i) newspapers; (ii) magazines; and (iii) periodicals, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4795/08)

The Minister of Education: Is mar seo a leanas atá an fhaisnéis a hiarradh:

The information requested is as follows:

Actual Spend (Financial Years)

April 2005 – March 2006

Newspapers – £4,372.95

Periodicals – £408.15

April 2006 – March 2007

Newspapers – £3,882.29

Periodicals – £1,213.70

April 2007 – March 2008

Newspapers – £3,325.68

Periodicals – £2,818.71

No expenditure on magazines.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Job Categories

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the forecasted numbers and job categories of skilled/ qualified professional and technical employees, including apprentices, that will be required in each of the next five years in order to successfully underpin the local economy. (AQW 4637/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The most recent forecasts of annual demand for each occupation in Northern Ireland to 2015 are set out in the table below.

The Executive has established a responsive system to ensure that the skill needs of the economy are met. My Department has established a Skills Expert Group to consider how best to respond to changing skills demands at the regional level. At a local level, six employer-led Workforce Development Forums (WDF) have been established. The WDFs ensure that local labour and skills needs are taken into account when planning for training provision. This framework is underpinned by the work of the 25 employer-led Sector Skills Councils (SSCs). Each SSC is developing a sector Skills Agreement which provides an evidence base for training needs in its sector and outlines how these are to be met.

TABLE: ANNUAL AVERAGE REPLACEMENT AND EXPANSION DEMAND BY OCCUPATION, 2005-2015

	Employed 2005	Expansion Demand	Replacement Demand	Total Requirement
Corporate managers	57,920	710	4,100	4,810
Managers & proprietors in agriculture & services	20,830	280	1,920	2,200
Science & technology professionals	17,480	160	1,220	1,380
Health professionals	9,450	150	360	510
Teaching & research professionals	37,790	290	2,070	2,360
Business & public service professionals	26,470	810	1,650	2,450
Science & technology associate professionals	9,410	90	830	920
Health & social welfare associate professionals	31,990	70	1,660	1,730
Protective service occupations	2,640	0	130	140
Culture, media & sports occupations	9,050	100	700	800
Business & public service associate professionals	28,840	290	2,760	3,040
Administrative occupations	70,640	100	6,610	6,710
Secretarial & related occupations	23,870	310	2,350	2,660
Skilled agricultural trades	25,950	-410	1,480	1,070
Skilled metal & electrical trades	31,630	-560	1,930	1,370
Skilled construction & building trades	36,220	270	2,180	2,450
Textiles, printing & other skilled trades	17,280	-50	1,660	1,600

	Employed 2005	Expansion Demand	Replacement Demand	Total Requirement
Caring personal service occupations	43,180	970	4,310	5,280
Leisure & other personal service occupations	13,700	100	1,370	1,470
Sales & customer service occupations	57,640	390	8,050	8,450
Customer service occupations	2,580	50	390	440
Process, plant & machine operatives	29,550	-400	3,020	2,620
Transport & mobile machine drivers & operatives	29,620	20	2,330	2,350
Elementary trades, plant & storage related occupations	22,970	-440	2,740	2,300
Elementary administration & service occupations	56,050	700	7,720	8,420

Notes: Numbers may not add due to rounding

Source: Regional Forecasts (2006) Occupation Forecasts and Replacement Demand Analysis for Northern Ireland, 2005-2015. (Department for Employment and Learning)

Press Officers

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of press officers that are employed by his department. (AQW 4758/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department for Employment and Learning currently employs four Press Officers (Information Officers) who provide support to the Minister and officials on core press office activity and work directly with the media on a regular basis. A further three Information Officers are employed in a marketing and administrative role.

Young People in Fermanagh

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of people in Co Fermanagh, aged between 16 and 18 years, who are not in education, employment or training. (AQW 4893/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Estimates of the number of people in Northern Ireland not in education, employment, or training are derived from the Labour Force Survey (LFS). Due to sample size constraints within LFS, it is not possible

to produce estimates at the level requested. At a Northern Ireland level, the latest figures for October-December 2007 estimate that there were 9,000 persons aged 16-18 in Northern Ireland who were not in employment, participating in government training schemes or in full-time education. It is not possible to separately identify those in part-time education or non-government sponsored training.

Qualifications Regulator

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline his plans for supporting the new policy of the qualifications regulator (QCA) of assisting employers to gain national recognition as awarding bodies; and to identify which of QCA's 4 models of employer engagement he favours to promote the skills agenda for the local economy.

(AQW 4902/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority was commissioned by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills to investigate how to recognise demand-led training and qualifications from employers and providers, for inclusion on the Qualifications and Credit Framework. At present a pilot is being run in England only, to test the models which have been referred to in the question. The pilot will run until the end of March 2008, when a report will be produced for English Ministers with recommendations on how the national qualifications system can meet the training needs of employers.

My Department has been maintaining a watching brief on developments, in collaboration with the Council for Curriculum Examination and Assessment, which is fully involved in the pilot. When I receive the final report, I will then decide which model, or models, will be best suited to promote the Northern Ireland skills agenda and also meet the demands of the local economy.

Neighbourhood Renewal Areas

Mrs McGill asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail, in addition to his department's mainstream responsibilities, the resources that have been allocated to (i) Neighbourhood Renewal Areas; and (ii) the Strabane Neighbourhood Renewal Area, in each of the last 2 years.

(AQW 4909/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

- (i) The Department for Employment and Learning has allocated the following resources to Neighbourhood Renewal areas in addition to its mainstream responsibilities.

Targeted Initiatives

Under Targeted Initiatives, resources allocated to West Belfast, Greater Shankill, Londonderry and Strabane (all Neighbourhood Renewal Areas) for each of the last 2 years are as follows:

2005/06 - £4,330,314

2006/07 - £2, 003,147

Labour Market Intermediaries

Resources allocated to North, South and East Belfast under Labour Market Intermediaries (LMIs) for the last 2 years are as follows:

2005/06 - £767,708

2006/07 - £702,320

Since April 2008, a new programme, the Local Employment Intermediary Service, has been available across Belfast and in Londonderry and Strabane.

Total	2005/6 £5,098,022
	2006/7 £2,705,467

- (ii) The data above is not disaggregated to individual areas, hence information for Strabane Neighbourhood Renewal Area is not available

Learning Disabilities

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4686/08, to detail the range of programmes and services that are funded by his department, to assist people with learning disabilities in finding and maintaining employment.

(AQW 4969/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) provides funding for a number of programmes that offer assistance to people with a wide range of disabilities, including those with learning disabilities, to find and maintain employment and vocational training. Programmes which are mainly available through DEL's Disablement Advisory Service (DAS) are: Workable (NI), New Deal for Disabled People, Access to Work, the Job Introduction Scheme, residential training; a Condition Management Programme and Work Preparation Programme available through the Pathways to Work initiative; and public match funding to assist organisations that receive European Social Fund (ESF) funding. DAS also offers job capability assessment to people with learning disabilities through its Occupational Psychology Service. Employment opportunities for people with disabilities are also provided by Ulster Supported Employment Ltd, which is a non-Departmental Public Body funded by the Department

DEL's new professional and technical training provision Training for Success is available to 16 to 24 year olds. This provision comprises two main strands, Apprenticeships and Job-Ready. The latter is designed for 16 to 18 year olds (or up to the day before their 22nd birthday for those with a learning disability) and covers personal development, skills for work, employability skills and pre-apprenticeships.

Contracted training organisations can draw on specialist support for participants who have additional physical, learning, or sociological needs.

Programmes funded by the Department, with the exception of some of those that are match funded, are generic in nature and not targeted at any particular disability category such as people with a learning disability. The programmes are demand led and the disability category of participants is dependent on those who are recruited. The Department provides match funding for projects under the ESF and historically these have included projects of benefit to people with disabilities. The current ESF assessment process is not yet complete but results should be known in April.

Racial Discrimination

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the number of reported racial discrimination cases brought against statutory bodies in the past three years; and (ii) the number of these cases upheld. (AQW 5018/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Office of the Industrial Tribunals and The Fair Employment Tribunal (OITFET) does not categorise respondent details into employment sectors such as statutory bodies, private businesses and departments of the Executive.

OITFET maintains a public register of tribunal claims and decisions. However, given the manual nature of these registers, the information requested could only be extrapolated through an extensive manual exercise and at a disproportionate cost.

However the following data is the information that OITFET can provide from its Management Information Systems.

The number of complaints included in claims brought to an industrial tribunal under the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 and subsequently registered by OITFET in each of the last 3 years as a % of all complaints to industrial tribunals.

RACE RELATIONS COMPLAINTS REGISTERED BY OITFET

2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08 (to date)
88	79	108	112
1.75%	2.77%	2.49%	2.6%

The number of Race Relations complaints promulgated by way of a decision of an industrial tribunal in each of the last 3 years and the outcome recorded were:-

RACE RELATIONS COMPLAINTS PROMULGATED BY AN INDUSTRIAL TRIBUNAL

Year	Allowed	Dismissed	Dismissed/ Struck Out	Withdrawn	Conciliated	Settled	Stayed	Total
2004/05	1	10	6	108	16	9	0	150
2005/06	5	8	6	48	14	14	1	96
2006/07	3	4	9	29	25	30	0	100
2007/08 (To date)	2	11	4	39	33	29	0	118

Racial Discrimination

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the number of reported racial discrimination cases brought against private businesses in the past three years; and (ii) the number of these cases upheld. (AQW 5019/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Office of the Industrial Tribunals and The Fair Employment Tribunal (OITFET) does not categorise respondent details into employment sectors such as statutory bodies, private businesses and departments of the Executive.

OITFET maintains a public register of tribunal claims and decisions. However, given the manual nature of these registers, the information requested could only be extrapolated through an extensive manual exercise and at a disproportionate cost.

However the following data is the information that OITFET can provide from its Management Information Systems.

The number of complaints included in claims brought to an industrial tribunal under the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 and subsequently registered by OITFET in each of the last 3 years as a % of all complaints to industrial tribunals.

RACE RELATIONS COMPLAINTS REGISTERED BY OITFET

2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08 (to date)
88	79	108	112
1.75%	2.77%	2.49%	2.6%

The number of Race Relations complaints promulgated by way of a decision of an industrial tribunal in each of the last 3 years and the outcome recorded were:-

RACE RELATIONS COMPLAINTS PROMULGATED BY AN INDUSTRIAL TRIBUNAL

Year	Allowed	Dismissed	Dismissed/ Struck Out	Withdrawn	Conciliated	Settled	Stayed	Total
2004/05	1	10	6	108	16	9	0	150
2005/06	5	8	6	48	14	14	1	96
2006/07	3	4	9	29	25	30	0	100
2007/08 (To date)	2	11	4	39	33	29	0	118

Racial Discrimination

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the number of reported racial discrimination cases brought against the departments of the Executive in the past three years; and (ii) the number of these cases upheld.
(AQW 5020/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Office of the Industrial Tribunals and The Fair Employment Tribunal (OITFET) does not categorise respondent details into employment sectors such as statutory bodies, private businesses and departments of the Executive.

OITFET maintains a public register of tribunal claims and decisions. However, given the manual nature of these registers, the information requested could only be extrapolated through an extensive manual exercise and at a disproportionate cost.

However the following data is the information that OITFET can provide from its Management Information Systems.

The number of complaints included in claims brought to an industrial tribunal under the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 and subsequently registered by OITFET in each of the last 3 years as a % of all complaints to industrial tribunals.

RACE RELATIONS COMPLAINTS REGISTERED BY OITFET

2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08 (to date)
88	79	108	112
1.75%	2.77%	2.49%	2.6%

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2004/05	1	10	6	108	16	9	0	150
2005/06	5	8	6	48	14	14	1	96
2006/07	3	4	9	29	25	30	0	100
2007/08 (To date)	2	11	4	39	33	29	0	118

Official Visits

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the protocols he follows in informing MLAs that he will be visiting their respective constituencies.
(AQW 5077/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department for Employment and Learning's Private Office contacts the relevant MLAs by telephone at their constituency offices at least 24 hours in advance of a Ministerial visit. Details of the reason for the visit are given, as well as the time and location. A contact number is also provided for MLAs to request further information if required. In compliance with new procedures agreed by the Junior Ministers, MLAs will now receive notification of Ministerial visits in writing.

Public Appointments

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the number of public appointments that have been made by his department since the restoration of devolution; and (ii) the number that were (a) female; and (b) elected councillors. (AQW 5099/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In the period between the restoration of Devolution and 14 March 2008, the Department for Employment and Learning made 169 public appointments.

Of these, 49 were female and 3 were elected councillors.

Modern Apprenticeships

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail his strategy for supporting sector skills councils in order to assist in the take-up of modern apprenticeships. (AQW 5125/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Whilst my Department provides assistance to the Sector Skills Councils in general terms, it has no specific strategy to support them on the take-up of apprenticeships. It is the responsibility of the Sector Skills Councils to identify the skills needs of their sector and to develop the appropriate approach to address these needs. This work is undertaken in conjunction with a variety of stakeholders and includes Government.

Frameworks for individual apprenticeships are developed by the relevant Sector Skills Council and these specify entry requirements for participants, as well as the required outcomes. Training for these

frameworks is funded by the Department under the apprenticeship strand of Training for Success.

The Department is also carrying out an initial review of Training for Success. Departmental officials intend to meet a number of Sector Skills Councils, to discuss the content of and structures supporting the provision, as well as how Sector Skills Councils might contribute further to ensuring it best meets the needs of the sectors they represent.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Departmental Funding

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the funding that his department has allocated to the Armagh City and District Council area, for each of the last 5 years. (AQW 4443/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): The funding allocated to the Armagh City and District Council area by my Department in each of the last 5 years is detailed in the attached table.

Funding Allocated	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07*	2007/08 (1/4/07 - 29/2/08)
INTERREG 111A (Renewable Energy/Energy Efficiency)	-	-	£31,000	-	£34,000 £7,000 (expected by 31 March 2008)
Armagh/Monaghan Digital Corridor Project	-	-	-	£328,360 (Apr 06 to Oct 07)	-
EU Programme for Peace & Reconciliation	-	£568,000 (Letter of Offer)	-	-	£1,059,350 (Letters of Offer)
ERDF (Building Sustainable Prosperity Programme)	£84,699	£66,361	£225,610	£93,184	£98,066
N.I. Tourist Board Grant Assistance Paid	£34,356	-	-	-	-
N.I. Tourist Board Offers of Grant – No payments made yet	-	£220,776	-	£40,000	£374,839
Invest NI Assistance to Clients within Armagh City and District Council	£1,400,000	£1,300,000	£600,000	£4,100,000	**£1,400,000
Totals	£1,519,055	£2,155,137	£856,610	£4,561,544	£2,973,255

* Under Reconnect (Household Renewable Energy Grant Scheme) £450,000 offers of grant have been made since July 2006.

** These are in-year provisional figures, which are subject to change

Departmental Funding

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the plans his department has in relation to funding initiatives in the Armagh City and District Council area for the next 3 years. (AQW 4444/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The planned funding to be allocated by DETI to the Armagh City and District Council Area, for each of the next 3 years, is £3.56m.

The majority of this figure relates to the £3.5m allocated under the Programme for Government to develop the St. Patrick's/Christian Heritage Signature Project. Whilst this project spans Northern Ireland, the key tourist centres that will benefit from this support are Downpatrick and Armagh City.

The remaining £60,000 is for a DETI sponsored 'High Speed Broadband Trial' commencing in March 2008 in Middletown, Co Armagh.

Further funding for the Armagh City and District Council can be accessed from the New ERDF Competitiveness Programme. This will provide Councils with the opportunity to seek support for economic based projects which meet the Lisbon criteria of innovation, R&D and entrepreneurship. Councils will be invited to bid for support from the Programme which has a value of £50m over its lifetime.

In addition, the NITB recently opened the Tourism Development Scheme 2008-2011 which offers financial assistance of up to £500,000 to capital projects for the development of tourism amenities and attractions. This scheme operates as an open call and all areas of Northern Ireland are eligible to apply.

Invest NI does not allocate funding to particular geographical locations, rather the assistance provided by Invest NI is demand-led by businesses which can demonstrate the potential for growth, primarily through the development of markets outside Northern Ireland.

In August 2005, Invest NI agreed an Acquisition and Disposal Strategy for industrial land to serve the needs of its client companies over the medium to long term. One of the four priority areas included in this strategy was Armagh and Invest NI launched a project to acquire land. The agency is currently completing a scoping study and a decision on the way forward will be taken as soon as possible.

Scotch Irish/ Ulster-Scots Heritage

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm that he will make it policy to develop Scotch Irish/ Ulster-Scots heritage

as a Northern Ireland Tourist Board signature project. (AQW 4592/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Tourism Strategic Framework for Action 2004-2008 (SFA) identified five Signature Projects with the potential to deliver world class excellence, drawing visitors from home and overseas. Development continues, and significant funding has been identified in the Programme for Government for their delivery.

An independent evaluation of the SFA recently endorsed the five Signature Project approach, and DETI, in consultation with NITB, is currently considering the next phase of the SFA. No decisions will be taken on the possibility of more Signature Projects before this work is complete.

The Ulster Scots heritage is a vital part of Northern Ireland's tourism offering, and the influence of the Ulster Scots on the history of Northern Ireland will be reflected as a theme within the existing Signature Projects. For example, the Causeway Coast and Glens Signature Project will feature the Ulster Scots culture in the Glens of Antrim and the Andrew Jackson Centre, and the Ulster Scots contribution will also form an important element of the "Walled City" project in Londonderry.

NITB is currently working with the Ulster Scots Agency and Ulster-Scots Heritage Council to define an Ulster Scots product that can be marketed to the travel trade and Ulster Scots groups in the target markets for the 2009 season. In addition, the Ulster Scots element of the food, craft, 'tracing your roots' product currently being developed for market will be identified and highlighted.

Textiles Industry

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of jobs lost in the textiles industry in each of the last 3 years; and (ii) the actions he is taking to protect the industry from further job losses. (AQW 4619/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It is not possible to provide an exact measure of the number of jobs lost in the textiles industry in each of the last 3 years as companies are only legally required to notify the Department of impending redundancies of 20 or more employees. However, Table 1 below shows the number of employee jobs in the manufacture of textiles and textile products sector, and the net change each year, between September 2004 and September 2007.

TABLE 1. NI EMPLOYEE JOBS IN THE MANUFACTURE OF TEXTILES AND TEXTILE PRODUCTS BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 2004 AND SEPTEMBER 2007

Period	Total Jobs in Manufacture of Textiles and Textile products	Annual Net Change
2004	6,210	-
2005	4,770	-1,440
2006	3,520	-1,250
2007	3,070	-450

Figures relate to the September quarter each year and are rounded to the nearest 10 as a result differences between levels may not match those in the final column.

Source: Northern Ireland Quarterly Employment Survey

The textiles and clothing industry in Northern Ireland must continue to respond to the challenges arising from globalisation and from the restructuring of the Northern Ireland economy. Government support to the sector is designed to help companies improve capabilities in the higher value-added areas of design and marketing, the use of IT, supply chain management and the development of strategic alliances and exporting capacity.

In spite of the difficulties associated with restructuring on this scale, successful business development initiatives have emerged based on innovation and design and the targeting of high value added niche markets. For example, companies such as O'Neill's Sportswear, Cooneen Textiles and Cooneen Watts and Stone have shown an ability to adapt and diversify in the face of intense competition and Invest NI will continue to play a key role in supporting and encouraging these developments.

Trivirax

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of state funding that (i) has been recovered; and (ii) is planned to be recovered, by Invest NI in relation to the collapse of Trivirax in 2005. (AQW 4624/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: At the Adjournment Debate on 22 January 2008, I informed the House that owing to delays in agreeing creditor claims, dividend payments had, in turn, been delayed. The Joint Administrators are continuing the process of reviewing and confirming creditor claims. Until this process is complete to their satisfaction, they are not in a position to distribute available funds to the creditors. Accordingly, none of the unsecured creditors have recovered any funds at this time.

Invest NI is in regular contact with the Joint Administrators and is providing clarification on

specific aspects of its claim. The Joint Administrators have indicated it is their intention to complete the Administration over the coming months. Until the process is complete, I am not in a position to confirm the amount of funds to be recovered. Invest NI remains confident it can maximise the recovery of public funds in this case.

I will keep the House fully informed as to the recovery of public funds in this case

Press Officers

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of press officers employed by his department. (AQW 4646/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department employs three Press Officers and one Assistant Press Officer.

In addition, DETI has engaged a temporary Press Officer to handle specific projects.

Titanic Signature Project

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide an update on the progress made to identify the necessary funds to construct and complete the proposed Titanic Signature Project; and to confirm if the project will be completed by the 2012 Olympic year. (AQW 4701/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department is continuing to work with Titanic Quarter Limited and the Belfast Harbour Commissioners to identify potential funding sources for the construction and completion of the Titanic Signature Project by 2012.

In light of the elapse of time, the project will be the subject of an updated economic appraisal

Renewable Energy

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm if Invest NI will fund smaller scale production facilities to manufacture (i) wood pellets from waste wood; and (ii) bio-crops from sustainable forests, to promote the renewable energy market. (AQW 4790/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI actively supports the emerging renewable energy sector and has invested in several new renewable energy projects in recent years. It currently has projects active in the Wind, Marine and Biomass sub-sectors ranging from manufacturing of domestic

and commercial wind turbines to research and development of wave turbines and conversion of waste wood into wood pellet fuel.

For ideas at an early stage, the Start a Business Programme can provide a package of support that encompasses the assessment of the business idea, training, financial and business planning, access to financial support and a subsidised web package.

For businesses in the sector that are not established Invest NI clients, the agency's Technical Development Incentive (TDI) Scheme can provide smaller companies (typically those with fewer than 20 full-time employees) with technical support to resolve development problems and accelerate them towards Invest NI's larger product and process development R&D schemes. Up to £2,000 of assistance can be provided to resolve specific technical issues such as investigating new technologies/processes and product compliance. The manufacture of wood pellets from waste wood and bio-crops from sustainable forests could potentially be assisted by this scheme.

More varied assistance is available to those companies in the renewable energy sector that qualify as Invest NI clients. To qualify as a client, businesses must be able to demonstrate that they currently, or over the next three years, will have total sales of over £100,000 per annum and have sales outside Northern Ireland greater than 25 per cent of turnover, or greater than £250,000 per annum.

Although the agency cannot support its clients to import and install existing global technologies for the manufacture of wood pellets from waste wood or bio-crops from sustainable forests, it will consider assistance for those projects involving the creation or development of new technology in the sector. Such projects should be capable of becoming saleable products or services that can be packaged and replicated and have the potential to be sold in export markets. As a general rule, the Intellectual Property for such developments should also reside with the client in Northern Ireland. In the case of manufacturing wood pellets from waste wood, Invest NI must also be satisfied that sufficient raw material exists to supply the market without causing displacement.

Invest NI can also provide support to help businesses develop, research and commercialise new products and processes and encourages its clients to undertake more research in these areas and to bring existing research to commercialisation stage through linkages with the Universities. Important elements of the agency's Business Development Solutions are also focused on R&D and Sustainable Development. These tools enable Invest NI to provide support and assistance to client companies to develop products and processes which generate, exploit or use alternative energy sources.

Newspaper Spending

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount his department has spent on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in each of the last three years. (AQW 4851/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The amount spent on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in each of the last 3 years is

2004/05	£26,917.68
2005/06	£30,624.93
2006/07	£26,129.70

Tourism Campaign

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of the allocation of £500,000 to a tourism campaign to attract visitors from Scotland and the North of England, to detail (i) the number of new jobs that will be created; and (ii) the expected revenue that will be generated from the campaign over the next 3 years. (AQW 4887/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It is not readily possible to identify the number of jobs created or revenue generated as a result of a single tourism marketing campaign. The campaign to which the question refers is part of a wider marketing strategy to maximise the number of visitors from Great Britain to Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland.

Tourism Ireland Limited's overall target for Great Britain is to achieve a 5% increase over last year's figures in the number of visitors from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. This would result in additional 52,000 visitors and an estimated additional revenue of circa £15m. The Tourism Satellite Accounts, developed by DETI and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, suggest that approximately 29 jobs are supported by every £1 million of tourism expenditure

Tourism Publicity Campaign

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide a detailed breakdown of the tourism publicity campaign that will target Scotland and the North of England for the period March to June 2008. (AQW 4889/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: A new marketing campaign, run jointly by Tourism Ireland Limited (TIL) and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB), is aimed at increasing visitor numbers

to Northern Ireland this year from Scotland and the north of England.

This new campaign will include an extensive publicity effort with coverage in top newspaper titles including the Manchester Evening News, Liverpool Echo, Yorkshire Evening Post, The Scotsman, The Herald, Glasgow Evening Times and the Edinburgh Evening Times. A series of radio promotions will focus on events and weekend or short breaks including Belfast and the Londonderry Jazz Festival will run from March to May on a number of stations including Capital Gold Manchester, Century FM NW, Smooth FM NW, Real Radio Yorkshire, Classic FM (Scotland), Radio Clyde and Radio Forth. These will be complemented by advertising and co-operative marketing activity with Northern Ireland ferry operators. The campaign will provide persuasive reasons to visit Northern Ireland highlight the ease of access by sea and air and will showcase good value fares and compelling offers from local industry partners.

A special St Patrick's Celebration holiday fair, involving Northern Ireland tourism industry partners, is being staged at Merchant Court in Glasgow. This event is being hosted by Eamonn Holmes. Northern Ireland will also be promoted at the three-week long Celtic Connections music festival in Glasgow.

Familiarisation visits for influential group travel organisers from Scotland and the north of England will be organised to allow them to sample the Northern Ireland holiday experience for themselves.

The marketing programme will build on the Northern Ireland-specific promotion carried out in Scotland and north of England by TIL last autumn. This will be additional activity over and above TIL's core marketing programme in Great Britain for 2008.

Public Appointments

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of people that have been appointed under public appointments by his department since the restoration of devolution; and (ii) the number that were (a) female; and (b) elected councillors. (AQW 4963/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Information sought is set out in the table below:

Total Number of Appointments made from 8 May 2007 to 12 March 2008	3
Number That Were Female	1
Number That Were Elected Councillors	None

Draft Regional Innovation Strategy

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his plans to use the Economic Development Departments in district councils to promote the Draft Regional Innovation Strategy. (AQW 4988/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: There is a range of activities within the draft Regional Innovation Strategic Action Plan (RISAP) which highlight the role that the Economic Development Departments in District Councils are playing to promote innovation in Northern Ireland. These include working in partnership with the universities, the Department for Employment and Learning and Invest NI in delivering seminars aimed at enhancing the absorptive capacity of businesses; working with the Institute of Directors and local Business Angel networks to help businesses access private equity finance; and Belfast City Council working with the Northern Ireland Science Park to help the creation of new knowledge intensive business start-ups.

A number of initiatives being led by the Federation of Small Business, the Centre for Competitiveness and Association of Northern Ireland Colleges (ANIC), which are being delivered at a local level to small and micro businesses, also provide the opportunity for District Councils to promote the RISAP and contribute to the Programme for Government goal of a dynamic, innovative economy.

Tourism Signature Projects

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide a timescale within which the Northern Ireland Tourist Board will review the potential to expand the number of tourism signature projects. (AQW 5001/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Tourism Strategic Framework for Action 2004-2008 (SFA) identified five Signature Projects with the potential to deliver world class excellence, drawing visitors from home and overseas. Development continues, and significant funding has been identified in the Programme for Government for their delivery.

An independent evaluation of the SFA recently endorsed the five Signature Project approach, and DETI, in consultation with NITB, is currently considering the next phase of the SFA. The aim is to introduce this within the next twelve months. No decisions will be taken on the possibility of more Signature Projects before this work is complete.

Support for Tourism Businesses

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm if Invest NI intends to review the restriction, contained within the Support for Tourism Businesses policy document, on financial assistance for hotel development within a 10 mile radius of Belfast. (AQW 5003/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: A moratorium on capital support for the development of new hotels and the extension or upgrading of existing hotels within a ten mile radius of Belfast city centre was introduced by NITB in 1997 and remains in place at this time.

It was considered that the market in Belfast was sufficiently buoyant to encourage the private sector to make the investment necessary to meet demand. As such no market failure was deemed to exist.

The rationale for the moratorium was revisited in 2006 and it was concluded that Belfast achieves high occupancy rates and that there are many significant developments in the pipeline – suggesting that the private sector is fully engaged in meeting increasing market demand. As such the review group saw no reason to lift the moratorium.

While there are no plans for a specific review of the moratorium, Invest NI and NITB with assistance from DETI Tourism Policy Branch are however beginning a process to review future tourism accommodation needs across Northern Ireland. It is intended that the review will inform any change to Invest NI policy for support of the tourism accommodation sector.

Strangford Lough

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for his assessment of the potential of Strangford Lough as a future tourism signature project. (AQW 5004/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: An independent evaluation of the Strategic Framework for Action 2004 – 2008 (SFA) recently endorsed the five Signature Project approach and DETI, in consultation with NITB, is currently considering the next phase of the SFA. Any assessment of potential signature projects will be undertaken as part of that work and no decisions will be taken on the possibility of more signature projects before it is complete. In the meantime the Strangford Lough area will benefit from its relationship with the existing signature projects.

In addition, the area is rich in cultural heritage and has a well established tourist trail, which links into several of the main cultural tourism themes - excellent crafts, houses and gardens, food, Christian Heritage

and myths and legends. Development of these products can continue to increase the amount of time visitors spend in the area

Official Visits

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the protocols he follows in informing MLAs that he will be visiting their respective constituencies. (AQW 5076/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As agreed by the Executive, the Minister's Private Office informs MLAs of a Ministerial visit to their constituency at least 24 hours in advance of the visit and provides relevant details.

Broadband Access

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to his answer to AQO 2499/08, to detail the range of alternative technical solutions that may be used where broadband cannot be delivered by telephone wires. (AQW 5098/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Current solutions suggested by the industry include extending the reach of existing services using Local Loop Unbundling, Sub-Loop unbundling, channel bonding and Fibre to the Cabinet. In addition there are a number of wireless technologies available including 3G, WiMax and WiFi which can offer the flexibility of mobile broadband services. There are of course satellite technologies that can be used to deliver broadband services. All of these technologies have strengths and weaknesses and it is not DETI's aim to mandate any one technology over another. The technologies used to deliver commercial broadband services will ultimately be decided by the private sector.

ENVIRONMENT

Planning Service

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of occasions that, as a result of representations made to her, she instructed the Planning Service to withdraw applications presented to councils, either as (i) approvals; or (ii) refusals, for further detail. (AQW 4102/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): As part of the normal procedures for handling planning applications, any application can be removed from a

Council schedule and/or decisions may be held following Council consultation as a result of late representations. This is to allow for further consideration of the late issues raised in order to comply with the requirements of the Human Rights Act. No records are kept of such cases which can arise for a number of reasons through both verbal and written representations to Ministers, MLAs and Councillors.

Pomeroy Community Development Project

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of the Environment, given the urgency associated with the funding deadlines for the Pomeroy Community Development Project, and the related planning application (I/2007/0435/RM), to detail the reasons why she requested the removal of the application, a matter of hours before the planning schedule was due to be presented to Cookstown District Council on Tuesday 12 February 2008, given that Planning Service had recommended this application for approval. (AQW 4123/08)

The Minister of the Environment: This application was withdrawn from the Cookstown Council Schedule to allow for the consideration of late representations in line with normal procedures.

I can confirm that, following this further consideration, the Department's decision granting planning permission has now been issued.

Planning Applications

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment whether or not she requested the withdrawal of a planning application which was due to be presented to Cookstown District Council on Tuesday 12 February 2008. (AQW 4278/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I can confirm that an application was removed from the planning schedule presented at Cookstown District Council on Tuesday 12 February 2008 following receipt of late representations through my office. This withdrawal followed normal procedures which allow for the further consideration of late issues raised and ensures that the planning process complies with the requirements of the Human Rights Act.

You will wish to be aware that, following this further consideration, the Department's decision to grant planning permission has now been issued.

Novelty Cars

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the legislation that is currently in place in

relation to 'novelty cars', such as limousines.

(AQW 4465/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Any private car, whether it is a "novelty" or conventional vehicle, must be registered and licensed under the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994 before it can be used on the road. If the vehicle has eight passenger seats or fewer and has not been previously registered, such licensing will depend on it having an EC certificate of conformity or national approval certificate in accordance with the Motor Vehicles (EC Type Approval) Regulations 1998.

If four years or more have elapsed from first registration of such a vehicle, licensing will be subject to it having an "MOT" certificate in accordance with the Motor Vehicles (Testing) Regulations (NI) 2003. Larger vehicles such as minibuses or heavy goods vehicles are subject to annual testing at one year old.

Use of the vehicle for hire and reward will require it to have a Public Service Vehicle (PSV) licence. In such a case the vehicle must comply with the Public Service Vehicles (Conditions of Fitness, Equipment and Use) Regulations (NI) 1995, the Motor Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations (NI) 1999, the Road Vehicles Lighting Regulations (NI) 2000 and the Road Vehicles (Registration and Licensing) Regulations 2002.

An operator who intends to carry passengers and their luggage for reward in a vehicle with nine or more passenger seats must also obtain a road service licence under the Transport Act (NI) 1967.

Conflict Transformation Centre

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm if a planning application has been received by her department for a conflict transformation centre at the proposed Maze stadium site; and if so to detail (i) the nature and functions of the proposed development; and (ii) the prior usage of existing buildings to be included in the proposed centre, including any notable historical events associated with those buildings. (AQW 4542/08)

The Minister of the Environment: No planning application has been submitted to Planning Service for a Conflict Transformation Centre at the Maze Stadium site.

Building Preservation Trusts

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the funding her department offers to Northern Ireland's Building Preservation Trusts and those charitable organisations who act to remove

historic buildings from the 'Buildings at Risk' register. (AQW 4556/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is empowered, subject to DFP approval, to provide funding to Building Preservations Trusts (BPTs) and other charitable organisations with similar aims. A list of those organisations that have benefited from this type of funding in the 2007/08 financial year is attached to this Answer.

Under proposals resulting from the review of historic buildings grant-aid, which are now the subject of public consultation, an amount of up to £500,000 would be set aside each year, initially for a three-year period, to assist such organisations, particularly in relation to the cost of acquisition of Buildings at Risk. This would be in addition to any other grant-aid to which such trusts and other organisations might be entitled, under the normal Historic Buildings Grant-Aid scheme, for repair and maintenance.

My Department also has a long-standing partnership agreement with the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society (UAHS); funding is currently provided at £60,000 per year. The UAHS compiles the 'Buildings at Risk' register, amongst other things, as part of this agreement.

Historic Buildings

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of the Environment to (i) confirm that the review of the grant aid system for historic buildings has been completed; (ii) explain the outcome of the review; and (iii) state when this information will be made public. (AQW 4557/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I can confirm that the review of historic buildings grant-aid has been completed.

The proposals arising from the review are currently out to public consultation; the final outcome will be known after all comments have been considered. The deadline for comments is 21 April 2008. A copy of the document detailing all of the proposals is attached for information.

It is hoped to make the final outcome known before the end of May 2008.

Buildings Delisted

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of buildings that have been delisted during second survey; and (ii) the principles for de-listing. (AQW 4558/08)

The Minister of the Environment: 423 buildings have been delisted since the second survey

commenced in 1997; by comparison, 444 new listings have been made during the same period.

Every listed building is re-visited when the Second Survey is being undertaken in any District Council area. Records are much more detailed now than during the First Survey, when, in many instances, only one photograph of the building's exterior was taken and no information was recorded on the interior. During the evaluation of the records received, each building is assessed according to the criteria for listing, such as age, style, historical association and scarcity. The Second Survey provides a full record of each building, as well as researching a detailed history. These records are evaluated by the Forum of Conservation Architects. At this stage consideration is also given to any potential enforcement action. Following that, if it is considered that a building does not meet the statutory test of having 'special architectural or historic interest', then it is proposed for delisting. Consultation then takes place with the Historic Buildings Council and the relevant district council before a final decision is made.

Wildcats in Northern Ireland

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of wildcats in Northern Ireland. (AQW 4602/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Wildcat (*Felis sylvestris*) is a native species of the British Isles but is restricted in its range to the North of Scotland. The Wildcat does not therefore occur in Northern Ireland.

Planning Applications

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the action she is taking in response to community opposition to the planning application for an incinerator to burn chicken waste on the banks of Lough Neagh Glenavy. (AQW 4605/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The consortium promoting this proposal has not yet submitted a planning application. I am aware of the public reaction to the proposal but it would be inappropriate for me to offer any response since to do so would potentially prejudice the process of determining a planning application.

Overhanging Trees

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the current legislation and policy dealing with overhanging and tall trees in neighbouring properties. (AQW 4607/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There is currently no legislation in place dealing with overhanging branches or tall trees growing on neighbouring property.

As stated in an earlier response to the Member (AQW 279/08) I am keen to introduce legislation to deal with nuisance high hedges similar to that currently in force in England and Wales starting with a policy consultation on the detailed operation of the legislation, however, the timing will be subject to the consideration of other competing priorities.

Water Pollution

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the resources available to address incidents of pollution. (AQW 4620/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Environment and Heritage Service (EHS), an Executive Agency of the Department of the Environment, is responsible for investigating water pollution throughout Northern Ireland. EHS operates on a 24-hour, 365 days-a-year basis, to co-ordinate the Agency's response to incidents of water pollution affecting either the freshwater or marine aquatic environment in Northern Ireland.

EHS maintains the Water Pollution Hotline - 0800 80 70 60 to encourage the reporting of incidents which is available to the public at all times.

EHS employs 18 Headquarters Staff and 52 regionally based Field Staff to undertake a wide range of duties ranging from receiving and investigating reports of pollution to effluent sampling at locations consented to discharge under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999.

The EHS laboratory at Lisburn, is open for the receipt of samples on a 24 hour basis. A 'Duty Scientist' rota is operated to co-ordinate the receipt of samples and arrange analysis and, on occasions, to provide field staff with technical guidance outside of normal office hours.

EHS also has the following material resources at its disposal to aid pollution response and these include:-

- a. Three 4x4 vehicles;
- b. Ten box trailers containing pollution response equipment located throughout Northern Ireland to aid quick response;
- c. Assets located on a pollution risk basis specifically for both inland and coastal pollution response; and
- d. A range of specific pollution response equipment and consumables stored at the offices in Lisburn.

Seatbelts on Public Transport

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of the Environment if she has any plans to extend the compulsory use of seatbelts to the public bus service. (AQW 4634/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Motor Vehicles (Wearing of Seat Belts) (Amendment No 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007, which commenced on 27 February 2007, require adults and children aged 14 years and over to wear seat belts, where available, in the rear of all motor vehicles, including all passenger seats in buses and coaches. However, the requirement does not apply where a large or small bus is being used to provide a local service where the entire route consists of restricted roads (roads where street lighting is not more than 185 metres apart) or where the bus is constructed or adapted for the carriage of standing passengers and standing is permitted.

Even if a bus being used to provide a local service in a built-up area had seat belts fitted, it would be impractical to require or enforce the wearing of seat belts where passengers were boarding or alighting at frequent intervals. Similarly it would be unreasonable to require passengers in such buses to wear seat belts if others were being permitted to stand.

Where seat belts are required to be worn in buses and coaches, there is also a requirement for the operator to inform passengers by means of public announcements and/or the display of a pictogram at every seat.

Planning Policy Statement 14

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment, to detail the Ministers that were informed of the extra paragraph '16', that was inserted in the final draft of the Emerging Findings of Planning Policy Statement 14 presented to the Committee for the Environment, after the original publication was debated in the Assembly. (AQW 4635/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I circulated the proposed emerging findings paper to the Ministers who are members of the Executive Sub-committee, and to FM, dFM and other Ministers on Thursday February 7th seeking their agreement to issue it to stakeholders. Responses were required by 10am on Monday 11th.

Amendments were made on the Monday 11th to reflect the views expressed by Ministers; I agreed the final version around lunchtime.

Planning Policy Statement 14

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment to detail which Ministers raised concerns that ‘it would be difficult to cater for non-farming rural dwellers without leading to overdevelopment’, as outlined in paragraph 16 of the final Emerging Findings on Planning Policy Statement 14, that was presented to the Committee for the Environment. (AQW 4638/08)

The Minister of the Environment: At this stage of the process of developing a new PPS 14 I do not believe it would be helpful to indicate the views of individual Ministers.

Sewerage Systems

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 3154/08, to identify the 16 sewerage systems that (i) have been upgraded; and (ii) are currently being upgraded. (AQW 4656/08)

The Minister of the Environment:

- (i) The sewerage systems that have been upgraded serve the following locations: Cushendall, Cushendun, Glenarm, Helen’s Bay, Larne, Newry and Portstewart.
- (ii) The sewerage systems that are currently being upgraded serve the following locations: Antrim, Ballyclare, Ballymoney, Banbridge, West Belfast, Downpatrick, Enniskillen, Portrush, and Rostrevor.

Ruddy Ducks

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm if she has any plans to cull ruddy ducks. (AQW 4662/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In 2005 the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the EU LIFE-Nature programme agreed to fund a UK-wide eradication scheme for Ruddy Ducks to be undertaken by the Central Science Laboratory (CSL). My department has met with CSL and agreed to extend the cull taking place in Great Britain to Northern Ireland. A meeting has been arranged with CSL on 14th March 2008 to discuss various topics relating to the cull, including a start date for Northern Ireland.

Planning Applications

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the recourse available to applicants to the Planning Appeals Commission, whose applications were

decided upon prior to the implementation of changes to Planning Policy Statement 14. (AQW 4663/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Applicants refused planning permission under the original draft of Planning Policy Statement 14 may exercise their right of appeal to the Planning Appeals Commission in the normal manner i.e. within 6 months of the date of refusal. Any revised policy which is in place at the time of the appeal is an important material consideration in the appeal process. However as in all appeal cases the final decision rests solely with the Commission.

Planning Applications

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, for each month in the last 5 years, the number of planning applications received by each divisional planning office. (AQW 4672/08)

The Minister of the Environment: You will recall I wrote to all Members in December 2007 advising that from 14 December, statistics provided by Planning Service were no longer based on data extracted from a “live” database which was subject to continuous change. The approach, now being adopted by Planning Service, is to report from an off-line database of static, cleansed planning application records, which will bring the Agency into line with standards for reporting government statistics.

At present, I am able to provide figures in the attached table for the 2006/07 financial year only. Planning Service is currently in the process of preparing the data for the years prior to 2006/07. The target date for the release of this cleansed data is October 2008.

PLANNING APPLICATIONS 2006/07 BY MONTH RECEIVED AND DIVISION

Divisions	Apr-06	May-06	Jun-06	Jul-06	Aug-06	Sep-06
Ballymena	209	219	262	179	240	183
Belfast	275	311	321	242	230	220
Craigavon	260	283	382	262	265	268
Downpatrick	246	312	345	279	326	291
Headquarters	19	12	21	23	32	17
Londonderry	172	221	292	188	189	195
Omagh	294	309	281	256	254	249
All divisions	1475	1667	1904	1429	1536	1423

Divisions	Oct-06	Nov-06	Dec-06	Jan-07	Feb-07	Mar-07
Ballymena	202	214	158	217	218	266
Belfast	264	335	222	272	284	332
Craigavon	331	293	272	231	241	303
Downpatrick	304	306	288	284	320	377
Headquarters	16	25	21	15	22	18
Londonderry	254	243	155	205	211	267
Omagh	213	273	246	293	271	300
All divisions	1584	1689	1362	1517	1567	1863

Press Officers

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of press officers employed by her department. (AQW 4677/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The department currently employs 2 Press Officers.

Planning Staff Training

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the action she is taking to train planning staff for the introduction of the new Planning Policy Statement 14 legislation. (AQW 4688/08)

The Minister of the Environment: When the revised draft of Planning Policy Statement 14 is published Planning Service Headquarters will provide initial advice and guidance on implementing the new policy and will provide further advice as necessary. Draft PPS 14 is also a standing item on the internal Development Control Working Group where all Divisional Offices are represented and particular issues can be discussed and clarified.

More formal training can be taken forward by Planning Service's Training Unit where a specific need is identified by the internal working group.

Planning Process

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on the proposals to accelerate the planning process in relation to major projects; to provide a timescale within which the proposals will be implemented; and to detail the categories of project that may benefit from the proposals. (AQW 4702/08)

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 is now being applied 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 over the next couple of months.

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.

Planning Regulations

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the planning regulations that are in place to identify the ownership of development sites; and (ii) the timescale within which a developer is required to inform the Planning Service that ownership of a site has changed. (AQW 4704/08)

The Minister of the Environment: All planning applications must be accompanied by a certificate which identifies the owner of the land to which the application relates. The information provided to Planning Service is a statement of ownership and does not constitute proof of ownership. It is required to ensure that anyone with an interest in the land is aware that a planning application has been submitted.

There are no requirements in the planning legislation for developers to notify of changes in land ownership during the processing of a planning application.

MOT Test

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the waiting times for an MOT test at each of the Vehicle Testing Centres, at 1 March 2008. (AQW 4705/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Details of the average waiting times, at 1 March, for all test centres are included in the following table:

Test Centre	For week ending 1 March 2008	From 1 April 2007 – 1 March 2008
	Average weekly waiting times in days	Average year to date waiting times in days
Armagh	15	14
Ballymena	23	20
Belfast	18	17
Coleraine	19	16
Cookstown	33	20
Craigavon	22	16
Downpatrick	27	18
Enniskillen	19	22
Larne	20	18
Lisburn	19	16
Londonderry	21	16
Mallusk	14	15
Newry	21	21
Newtownards	23	16

Test Centre	For week ending 1 March 2008	From 1 April 2007 – 1 March 2008
	Average weekly waiting times in days	Average year to date waiting times in days
Omagh	13	16

Housing Development Projects

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the housing development projects in the North Down constituency, that have been given retrospective planning permission in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 4706/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Planning Service's current IT system does not record applications in sufficient detail to provide the information requested. Accurate figures for the years in question could only be provided through a manual exercise at disproportionate cost.

Planning Applications

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications that were in the backlog in each divisional planning office, for each month in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4722/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Details of the outstanding applications in each Divisional Planning Office for each month of each of the last 3 years are shown in the following table.

OUTSTANDING APPLICATIONS AT 31ST OF EACH MONTH FOR 2005

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Ballymena	3384	3252	3343	3416	3541	3528	3389	3268	3327	3174	2876	2830
Belfast	1635	1625	1647	1697	1840	1872	1845	1723	1607	1624	1628	1561
Craigavon	5403	5452	5560	5656	6040	5988	5884	5718	5701	5646	5349	5441
Downpatrick	3594	3641	3779	3917	4026	4032	4024	4042	4046	4007	3786	3732
HQ	345	344	347	350	373	382	389	403	392	417	420	430
Londonderry	2937	2993	3119	3300	3487	3409	3325	3288	3225	2857	2682	2681
Omagh	3840	4000	4350	5030	5768	5540	5225	5274	5162	5061	4934	4991

OUTSTANDING APPLICATIONS AT 31ST OF EACH MONTH FOR 2006

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Ballymena	2756	2687	2717	2768	2656	2584	2468	2371	2285	2209	2192	2095
Belfast	1549	1517	1595	1703	1722	1788	1826	1702	1666	1720	1758	1758
Craigavon	5345	5413	5358	5510	5531	5578	5548	5502	5604	5818	5831	5877

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Downpatrick	3401	3250	2985	2894	2822	2830	2851	2913	2837	2639	2627	2579
HQ	419	403	396	393	371	366	369	361	353	357	357	360
Londonderry	2659	2651	2817	2697	2674	2604	2558	2447	2375	2445	2455	2409
Omagh	4894	5509	6962	7167	7067	6678	6495	6349	6170	5789	5510	5274

OUTSTANDING APPLICATIONS AT 31ST OF EACH MONTH FOR 2007

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Ballymena	2078	2074	2094	2130	2037	2046	2030	2087	2215	2359	2401	2244
Belfast	1785	1859	1944	1989	2057	2077	2214	2156	2123	2151	2122	2137
Craigavon	5823	5753	5728	5689	5559	5511	5347	5149	5037	5045	4784	4503
Downpatrick	2667	2669	2763	2808	2936	3027	3123	3150	3171	3236	3290	3324
HQ	362	368	381	370	367	370	366	367	377	380	391	397
Londonderry	2371	2364	2402	2440	2530	2524	2554	2571	2587	2660	2611	2503
Omagh	4959	4713	4315	4082	3793	3724	3633	3541	4103	3940	3736	3385

Red Grouse

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of red grouse in the high Mournes. (AQW 4727/08)

The Minister of the Environment: EHS commissioned a Grouse survey of Northern Ireland in 2004. The results indicated a population of 3 pairs of Red Grouse in the high Mournes.

Management of the High Mournes

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment for her assessment of the management of the high Mournes, particularly in relation to the (i) flora; (ii) fauna; and (iii) wildlife. (AQW 4730/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In recognition of its importance for nature conservation, Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) has designated the Eastern Mournes Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) under the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 (the Order), and as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) in accordance with the EC Habitats Directive. The ASSI embraces approximately 7500 hectares of upland habitat within the High Mournes.

The Order places a statutory duty on EHS to ensure that lands within an ASSI are managed in a manner that will secure the special scientific interests. In pursuit of this, EHS monitored the conditions of this area in 2003 as part of a six year monitoring cycle and evidence from this pointed to past land management practices, primarily overgrazing by sheep, as having a

detrimental effect on the habitat, which was assessed as being in unfavourable condition.

EHS is presently seeking to secure appropriate land management practices to restore this ASSI habitat to favourable condition through its Management of Sensitive Sites (MOSS) scheme. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development agri-environment schemes also help promote sustainable land management practices.

As regards fauna, EHS is presently assessing the invertebrate assemblage of the High Mournes but results are not yet available. In relation to wildlife, a survey commissioned by EHS in 2004 on the status of red grouse in Northern Ireland demonstrated that there were three pairs in the Mournes area, which is not actively managed for this species.

Illegal Waste

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment to provide details of the most recent statistics in relation to the number of incidents of illegal dumping, broken down by local council area, for each month in the past five years. (AQW 4748/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Environment & Heritage Service (EHS) does not hold this information prior to 2004 and has only maintained it on a month by month basis since 2007.

Annex 1 contains a breakdown by District Council area for the years 2004 – 2006 and Annex 2 for 2007 on a monthly basis.

My officials are working with District Councils to encourage the use of the fly-tipping database (Flycapture) which would generate more reliable statistics on fly-tipping across Northern Ireland and inform policy decisions for tackling the problem. To date, uptake by District Councils has been slow.

ANNEX 1

Council	2004	2005	2006
Antrim	76	60	65
Ards	93	92	99
Armagh	124	74	65
Ballymena	23	32	64
Ballymoney	13	18	8
Banbridge	24	42	41
Belfast	83	58	67
Carrickfergus	7	10	26
Castlereagh	7	24	31
Coleraine	21	29	33
Cookstown	22	44	45
Craigavon	50	83	106

Council	2004	2005	2006
Derry City	61	34	43
Down	124	75	98
Dungannon	68	76	93
Fermanagh	66	51	91
Larne	29	24	31
Limavady	18	46	36
Lisburn	66	96	68
Magherafelt	33	30	39
Moyle	14	19	26
Newry & Mourne	62	90	72
Newtownabbey	50	50	51
North Down	16	34	16
Omagh	51	57	58
Strabane	25	80	39
Totals	1226	1328	1411

ANNEX 2

Council	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Totals
Antrim	5	5	4	8	5	8	8	6	7	5	4	1	66
Ards	7	0	5	9	4	9	6	3	2	9	3	3	60
Armagh	9	5	4	2	4	5	0	5	3	5	3	4	49
Ballymena	4	6	9	5	7	6	3	2	1	9	0	4	56
Ballymoney	2	0	2	1	0	2	3	1	0	1	1	1	14
Banbridge	7	0	1	3	2	2	0	3	0	1	4	1	24
Belfast	4	12	8	8	8	4	15	5	1	8	6	4	83
Carrickfergus	0	0	1	1	4	1	2	0	1	1	0	1	12
Castlereagh	1	1	1	0	3	1	1	4	5	0	1	1	19
Coleraine	6	2	8	2	3	2	3	2	2	3	0	0	33
Cookstown	2	1	3	5	7	2	4	3	1	1	4	1	34
Craigavon	12	4	10	11	3	6	6	6	6	6	0	3	73
Derry City	4	1	4	6	3	2	1	1	3	5	2	1	33
Down	17	5	11	12	8	7	7	4	5	3	3	5	87
Dungannon	12	3	18	9	11	13	12	10	4	9	10	5	116
Fermanagh	3	1	13	3	5	6	5	3	8	10	5	2	64
Larne	3	3	0	2	1	3	5	1	3	1	2	1	25
Limavady	2	6	2	0	6	1	2	4	1	4	2	3	33
Lisburn	10	4	22	7	8	6	3	8	1	5	10	6	90

Council	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Totals
Magherafelt	10	3	7	2	3	5	4	1	3	4	3	1	46
Moyle	1	1	3	1	1	0	1	0	0	5	0	0	13
Newry Mourne	8	6	10	2	8	7	8	4	6	5	11	4	79
Newtownabbey	16	2	6	0	5	4	12	3	2	0	5	0	55
North Down	1	0	1	1	2	1	1	1	0	2	1	1	12
Omagh	3	2	6	4	3	3	2	0	0	5	7	2	37
Strabane	2	2	4	9	6	1	6	1	5	5	7	4	52
Totals	151	75	163	113	120	107	120	81	70	112	94	59	1265

Driving Offences

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment for her assessment of a Europe-wide penalty points scheme for driving offences. (AQW 4749/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There are wide-ranging constitutional, legal and practical differences throughout Europe in terms of the application of penalty points. In some Member States penalty points are, for example, limited to relatively few offences while in others, as in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the list is more comprehensive.

Given this variation of offences and penalties across Member States, and the fact that there is no international legal framework for providing robustness against challenge, there is little scope, at present, for the introduction of a Europe-wide penalty points scheme for driving offences.

In the wider mutual recognition context, you may be interested to note that the 1998 European Convention on Driving Disqualifications provides for drivers, who are disqualified from driving in a Member State other than that in which they normally reside, to have that disqualification enforced against them in their State of residence and all other Member States. The Convention does not fully come into force across all Member States until the original 15 signatories have adopted it. However, it allows Member States to bring in bilateral arrangements early and the UK and Ireland are the first to take this initiative. Subject to completion of the legislative process, it is expected that mutual recognition of driving disqualifications between the two jurisdictions will be achieved by the end of 2008.

There is no mutual recognition of penalty points provided for in the 1998 Convention. However, I understand that the European Commission is considering a possible Directive to harmonise aspects of enforcement related to road traffic offences.

Tree Preservation Orders

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, since the introduction of Tree Preservation Orders, the companies and individuals that have been prosecuted for violations of these orders. (AQW 4752/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The City of Derry Golf Club was convicted on 20 March 2003 of contravening a Tree Preservation Order by cutting and wilfully destroying trees. The Club was fined £200.

George Best Belfast City Airport

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm that any proposals to extend the runway at the George Best Belfast City Airport, which raise environmental issues, will be subject to a full planning inquiry. (AQW 4755/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Service has not yet received an application for an extension to the runway at George Best Belfast City Airport although Pre-Application Discussions have been requested by the Airport's agents. An application is expected to be made although I am not aware of the timeframe. Any such application is likely to be dealt with under Article 31 of the Planning Order (NI) 1991. This allows the Department, if necessary, to cause a public local inquiry to be held by the planning appeals commission. A decision on whether or not to hold a public local inquiry can only be taken after consideration of the details of any application, the views of consultees and issues raised in any representations received.

George Best Belfast City Airport

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm when a draft of proposed changes to the planning agreement governing the operation of the George Best Belfast City Airport will be submitted for

consideration to (i) North Down Borough Council; and (ii) Belfast City Council. (AQW 4757/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My officials hope to consult with both Belfast City Council and North Down Borough Council, plus the Airport Forum Group, during April 2008.

It is expected that the revised draft Planning Agreement will be forwarded to the councils for consideration and comment before the end of March 2008.

Nuisance Hedges

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the consultations that are still ongoing in relation to the introduction of legislation on nuisance hedges. (AQW 4764/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There are no consultations underway at present. In 2005 my Department undertook a consultation to assess the scale and geographical spread of problems with nuisance high hedges with a view to determining whether legislation was required. On the basis of the findings of that consultation I made a commitment to introduce legislation to address this problem 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 the other competing priorities facing my Department.

Nuisance Hedges

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to provide (i) an update on the progress of proposed legislation in relation to nuisance hedges; and (ii) a timescale within which the legislation will be introduced. (AQW 4765/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I intend to bring forward legislation to address nuisance high hedges, starting with a policy consultation on the detailed operation of the legislation. However, the timing will be subject to consideration of the other competing priorities facing my Department.

Newspaper Expenditure

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her department's expenditure on (i) newspapers; (ii) magazines; and (iii) periodicals, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4797/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The table below sets out the total cost of newspapers, magazines and periodicals in my Department in each of the last three years.

Department	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
DOE	£18,250	£19,563	£23,363

Helicopter Pad

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the planning permission that is needed in order to provide a helicopter pad adjacent to homes. (AQW 4819/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Homeowners have permitted development rights to provide a hard surface area within the curtilage of their dwelling for any purpose incidental to the enjoyment of that dwelling house. Therefore a helicopter pad laid out in the garden area of a large dwelling would be permitted development not requiring planning permission as long it was used solely by the occupiers of the dwelling and for no commercial purpose.

In other instances not involving the garden area of a domestic dwelling, the laying out of a helicopter pad may require planning permission but it might be the case that a helicopter could land on existing hard standing areas such as a car park or indeed on a grassed area. Whether this would constitute a change of use of the land would very much depend on the frequency of use.

Illegal Waste

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4518/08, to detail (i) the number; and (ii) the location, of sites where illegal waste originating in the Republic of Ireland has been dumped. (AQW 4914/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Illegally deposited waste from the Republic of Ireland (RoI) has been discovered in 78 sites within Northern Ireland. The Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) is currently engaging with the competent authorities in RoI in respect of 20 sites containing waste exclusively from RoI. Most of the remaining sites contain either small amounts of RoI waste or RoI waste mixed with other waste or inert material. EHS is unable to disclose the location of these sites as to do so could prejudice ongoing investigations, or cases that have been heard in Court but are still subject to confiscation proceedings.

Planning System

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update of her comprehensive review of the planning system. (AQW 4936/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In November 2007 I announced that I intended to bring forward proposals for reform of the planning system.

A number of short term reform measures, which are currently underway, are focused on helping to tackle current workload pressures and producing early improvements in efficiency and effectiveness in the handling of planning applications.

In relation to the medium to longer term, my officials are working alongside Independent Expert on planning, Professor Greg Lloyd of the University of Liverpool, to develop proposals to be included in a public Consultation Paper due to be published this summer. My officials and Professor Lloyd are due to engage with the Environment Committee on these issues at their meeting on 10th April.

Medium to longer term reform measures will focus on more comprehensive changes to the planning system and involve research and policy development, public and stakeholder engagement, formal consultation on the emerging proposals, and legislative change. Those changes that do not require legislative provision will be rolled out on an ongoing basis, while, for those requiring legislative change, our PSA commitment is to bring forward the relevant legislation by March 2011.

Irish Hare Protection

Mr Savage asked the Minister of the Environment, to detail her plans to introduce legislation to provide permanent protection for the Irish hare. (AQW 4951/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department recently published a public consultation document on the Review of the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985. The consultation seeks views on a number of issues, including the issue of future statutory protection for the Irish Hare. The consultation closes on 6th June and I would encourage all interests to provide their views in order to inform future decisions about the Irish Hare.

Salmonid Rivers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the penalties that will be levied upon (i) her department; (ii) other government departments; (iii) commercial establishments; and (iv) private individuals, should they be deemed culpable as a result of a pollution incident on a feeder stream or

main river system that has been classified as salmonid. (AQW 4980/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Where it has been proven that the Department of the Environment or any another Government Department has caused pollution to a waterway, Crown immunity to prosecution can be invoked. However Environment & Heritage Service will seek to recover any and all costs incurred in carrying out works or operations to prevent water pollution or in undertaking remedial action following a water pollution incident.

Where it has been proven that a commercial establishment or private individual has caused pollution to a waterway, Environment & Heritage Service will seek to recover any and all costs incurred in carrying out works or operations to prevent water pollution or in undertaking remedial action following a water pollution incident.

Where Crown Immunity cannot be invoked and when the circumstances warrant it, a file containing all the evidence gathered in investigating a pollution incident will be forwarded to the Public Prosecution Service to consider whether or not it is appropriate to progress a prosecution through the courts.

Under legislation a person found guilty of an offence shall be liable –

- On conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 2 years or to a fine or to both.
- On summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 3 months or to a fine not exceeding £20,000 or to both.

Salmonid Rivers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the penalties the European Union can level at (i) her department; or (ii) other government departments/agencies, if they fail to protect a salmonid river or feeder stream. (AQW 4981/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Failure to protect European protected sites can lead to infraction proceedings instigated by the European Commission. The infraction process involves a number of key stages which give a Member State the opportunity to respond to and address the alleged failings.

In the event that Competent Authorities in Northern Ireland were ever found to have failed to adequately protect Special Areas of Conservation designated under the Habitats Directive or take corrective action to satisfy any concerns raised by the European Commission, the European Court of Justice could impose fines. Fines can take the form of penalty payments (e.g. on a daily basis) or lump sums, either separately or together. There are no

standard fixed amounts; the type and level of fine are decided by the European Court of Justice (which can take into account recommendations by the European Commission) depending on the merits of each individual case such as the seriousness and duration of the breach of European law.

Urban Feeder Streams

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, in light of the recent pollution incident on an urban feeder stream of the Sixmilewater River, the additional action her department is taking to increase the protection of urban feeder streams, particularly the vulnerable Threemilewater catchment area.

(AQW 4982/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Environment and Heritage Service (EHS), an agency within DOE, administers a system of discharge consents which lay down conditions relating to the quality and quantity of effluent that may be discharged to waterways.

The conditions are formulated using scientific protocols which ensure that the discharge can be sustained by the receiving water without damage to the aquatic environment and without breaching national or EC Directive standards.

EHS is aware that there are water quality issues in the Sixmilewater / Threemilewater catchment and it has indicated to stakeholders that it will develop plans via a stakeholder partnership (particularly in the context of the Water Framework Directive (WFD) River Basin Management Plans) to try and resolve them. A catchment stakeholders meeting was held on 13 March 2008.

EHS also has a small proactive team which visits industrial sites, conducts environmental audits and gives pollution prevention advice –and, if necessary, serves notices. This team has been active in the Sixmilewater and Threemilewater corridors.

EHS is also working closely with Northern Ireland Water Ltd (NIW) to ensure that sewer systems in the area are upgraded to minimise environmental impact and take into account the needs of future development.

Salmonid Rivers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the action she is taking to heighten the protection levels afforded to salmonid rivers.

(AQW 4997/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) has a statutory duty under the Environment (Northern

Ireland) Order 2002 to designate and protect rivers as Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) if they are considered to be of special interest by reason of their flora, fauna, geological, physiographical or other features, which would include Atlantic Salmon. It is also required to designate and protect rivers as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), if they merit such designation under EC Habitats Directive for their Atlantic salmon interests.

To date EHS has designated three ASSIs that have salmonoid interests and three SACs that are coincident with these ASSIs. One additional ASSI, and a coincident SAC, that embrace this interest will be designated by September 2008.

The EC Freshwater Fish Directive (FFD) (78/659/EEC), aims to protect or improve the quality of those running or standing freshwaters which support or which, if pollution were reduced or eliminated, would become capable of supporting fish life.

4,500 km of river length have been designated under this legislation. In addition, the Newry, Lagan and Coalisland canals along with 17 reservoirs and lakes have also been designated. These designations assist in maintaining and improving water quality, reducing pollution in rivers and creating the right habitat to encourage healthy fish populations.

The Water Framework Directive also requires the monitoring and classification of fish in terms of species, age and abundance in freshwaters. This will be undertaken at WFD surveillance monitoring stations comprising around 90 river stations and 27 lakes throughout the Province.

Public Appointments

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of public appointments that have been made by her department since the restoration of devolution; and (ii) the number that were (a) female; and (b) elected councillors.

(AQW 5023/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My department has made a total of 12 public appointments since the restoration of devolution; one was female and none were elected councillors. This total includes appointments and re-appointments to public bodies listed in the Public Appointments Annual Report. It does not include extensions.

Illegal Waste

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update of the progress made in the most recent discussions with authorities in the Republic of Ireland in relation to the arrangements for the removal

of illegal waste at (i) Slattinagh; (ii) Garrison; and (iii) Trillick; and to detail the resource implications of this work. (AQW 5130/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is currently in negotiations with DOEHLG and the relevant Irish Competent Authorities to deal with the repatriation of waste from two sites in Northern Ireland at Slattinagh (which is the same as the Garrison site) and Trillick with a view to progressing to other priority sites as soon as possible. While we are indeed making progress these are complex negotiations both legally and technically; further meetings will be required before we can determine the resource implications of having the waste removed from these sites in an environmentally sound manner.

Operations are still at the planning stage, but EHS estimates that four of its staff will need to be on the sites, for approximately 3 weeks per site, while the waste is removed.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Investigated Complaints

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of (i) sexual harassment; and (ii) bullying, complaints that have been investigated by each department, in each of the last 5 years; and to further detail the number of complaints that have been upheld. (AQW 4176/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The information requested is set out in the attached tables.

2007

Department	Sexual harassment	Upheld	Bullying	Upheld
OFMDFM	0	N/A	1	1
DARD	0	N/A	1	0
DCAL	1	0	1	0
DE	0	N/A	0	N/A
DEL	0	N/A	0	N/A
DETI	0	N/A	2	2 on-going
DOE	0	N/A	1	1 on-going
DFP	0	N/A	2	1+1 on-going
DHSSPS	1	0	1	0
DRD	0	N/A	0	N/A
DSD	2	2 on-going	9	2 on-going

2006

Department	Sexual harassment	Upheld	Bullying	Upheld
OFMDFM	0	N/A	0	N/A
DARD	0	N/A	0	N/A
DCAL	0	N/A	1	1
DE	0	N/A	0	N/A
DEL	0	N/A	1	0
DETI	0	N/A	0	N/A
DOE	0	N/A	0	N/A
DFP	0	N/A	8	1 + 1 partly upheld
DHSSPS	1	0	2	1
DRD	0	N/A	2	1 partly upheld
DSD	5	3 + 1 on-going	28	5 + 5 on-going

2005

Department	Sexual harassment	Upheld	Bullying	Upheld
OFMDFM	0	N/A	1	0
DARD	0	N/A	0	N/A
DCAL	0	N/A	0	N/A
DE	1(1)	1 partly upheld	2(1)	1 + 1 partly upheld
DEL	0	N/A	1	1 partly upheld
DETI	1(1)	1	3(1)	3
DOE	1(1)	1 partly upheld	2(1)	1 partly upheld
DFP	0	N/A	4	0
DHSSPS	0	N/A	0	N/A
DRD	0	N/A	2	1 partly upheld
DSD	3	1	28	4

(1) 1 complaint involved allegations of both sexual harassment and bullying

2004

Department	Sexual harassment	Upheld	Bullying	Upheld
OFMDFM	0	N/A	0	N/A

Department	Sexual harassment	Upheld	Bullying	Upheld
DARD	0	N/A	0	N/A
DCAL	0	N/A	0	N/A
DE	1	0	0	N/A
DEL	0	N/A	1	0
DETI	1	1	0	N/A
DOE	1	0	1	0
DFP	0	N/A	2	1 partly upheld
DHSSPS	0	N/A	1	0
DRD	0	N/A	0	N/A
DSD	3	0	11	3

2003

Department	Sexual harassment	Upheld	Bullying	Upheld
OFMDFM	0	N/A	0	N/A
DARD	0	N/A	0	N/A
DCAL	0	N/A	2	0
DE	0	N/A	3	1
DEL	0	N/A	0	N/A
DETI	0	N/A	0	N/A
DOE	1	1	2	1 partly upheld
DFP	0	N/A	2	0
DHSSPS	0	N/A	0	N/A
DRD	0	N/A	4	1 + 1 partly upheld
DSD	0	N/A	10	1

Staff Sick Leave

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1629/08, to detail the number of staff in each department, who have had two or more periods of sick leave of less than 5 days, in 2 or more of the last 3 years. (AQW 4206/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The details requested are set out in the attached table. They include the number of staff in each department who have had 2 or more periods of sick absence of less than 5 days in each period, in each of 2 or more of the last 3 financial years (04/05, 05/06 and 06/07).

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) produce a comprehensive annual analysis of sickness absence covering non-industrial staff in the 11 NI Departments. It also contains analyses of annual trends and progression towards targets. The following is an electronic link to the annual reports back to 2000/01 for your information <http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/pub-res-sick-absence>

TABLE A

Department (including their Executive Agencies & NDPBs where available)	Number of staff who have had 2 or more periods of sick absence of less than 5 days in each period, in each of 2 or more of the last 3 financial years (04/05, 05/06 and 06/07)
DOE *	Not readily available
DCAL	36
DE	82
DRD *	104 excludes Roads Service non-industrial staff as this is not readily available
DHSSPS *	Not readily available
DETI	172
DEL	203
DARD	227
OFMDFM	54
DSD *	Not readily available
DFP	387
Total	1265

* These Departments have confirmed that the information requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate costs.

Civil Service Job Vacancies

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of Northern Ireland Civil Service job vacancies in the Belfast area.

(AQW 4322/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of vacancies in permanent posts in the Belfast area, within the eleven Northern Ireland Departments and their Agencies, is set out in the attached table.

VACANCIES IN PERMANENT POSTS LOCATED IN THE BELFAST AREA, IN THE 11 NORTHERN IRELAND DEPARTMENTS AND THEIR AGENCIES, AT 1 FEBRUARY 2008*

Department	Number of vacant posts
DARD	79
DCAL	45.5

Department	Number of vacant posts
DE	0
DEL	79
DETI	49
DFP	165
DHSSPS	100
DOE	211
DRD*	147
DSD	611.5
OFMDFM	28
Total	1515

* latest figures available at 1 January 2008

Rates Bills

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of cases currently awaiting the issuing of rates bills following new or revised valuations, broken down by local government district. (AQW 4478/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of cases where the property has had a new or revised valuation and a bill has not yet been issued is shown by local government district in the table attached.

However, for a number of reasons, not all of these cases will result in rate bills. For example, reductions in valuations will result in refunds, while some rate-payers may be on full housing benefit or rate relief.

District Council	Cases
Antrim	296
Ards	811
Armagh	368
Ballymena	577
Ballymoney	299
Banbridge	240
Belfast	2,649
Carrickfergus	88
Castlereagh	221
Coleraine	1,244
Cookstown	397
Craigavon	1,116
Derry	1,252
Down	625

District Council	Cases
Dungannon & S.Tyrone	654
Fermanagh	731
Larne	657
Limavady	538
Lisburn	717
Magherafelt	929
Moyle	268
Newry & Mourne	628
Newtownabbey	301
North Down	389
Omagh	676
Strabane	952
Total	17,623

Rates Arrears

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount of rates arrears, broken down by local government district. (AQW 4479/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The total amount of rate arrears, broken down by local government district, is shown in the table attached. The table sets out both the arrears carried forward from 2006/07 rating year and the total arrears as at 5 March 2008. The final arrears position for 2007/08 will be available in May 2008, when the Statement of Rate Levy and Collection has been completed.

District	2006/2007 Arrears	Total Arrears (5/3/08)
Antrim	842,384	3,200,807
Ards	1,582,448	4,880,176
Armagh City & District	1,276,548	3,852,359
Ballymena	566,658	3,751,232
Ballymoney	415,135	1,314,787
Banbridge	685,847	2,653,148
Belfast	13,380,008	46,275,711
Carrickfergus	654,115	1,870,146
Castlereagh	1,017,715	5,043,009
Coleraine	914,931	4,279,013
Cookstown	502,026	1,796,605
Craigavon	2,009,725	8,179,936
Derry	3,113,923	9,457,003

District	2006/2007 Arrears	Total Arrears (5/3/08)
Downpatrick	1,515,903	4,374,571
Dungannon & South Tyrone	830,662	3,027,697
Fermanagh	843,207	3,224,436
Larne	417,213	1,450,675
Limavady	511,014	1,588,820
Lisburn	2,255,729	8,810,540
Magherafelt	398,811	1,949,228
Moyle	183,530	718,681
Newry	2,175,130	8,873,753
Newtownabbey	1,810,699	7,033,233
North Down	1,434,160	5,228,314
Omagh	786,907	3,100,132
Strabane	836,237	2,387,841
Total	40,960,663	148,321,855

Killeen Avenue, Bangor

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail who owns the land that runs between 4 Killeen Avenue and the doctor's surgery in Killeen Avenue in Bangor. (AQW 4517/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Without sight of a map indicating the area in question, an assumption has been made that the query relates to the land to the East of 4 Killeen Avenue and to the rear of the car park in Killeen Avenue.

If this assumption is correct then I would confirm that the lands are registered in Folio 14214 County Down – Registered Owners James Alan McMillan of Heathcoat, 86 Hawthornden Road, Belfast and Marian Joan McMillan of 86 Hawthornden Way, Belfast BT4 3LA.

Conflict Transformation Centre

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm if he has received any details of (i) set-up costings; (ii) function; (iii) recurrent costs; (iv) material purchase costs, and (v) the overall end cost, for the proposed conflict transformation centre at the Maze stadium site; and to detail the how the public owned buildings, that will incorporated into this conflict transformation centre, will be refurbished and redesigned. (AQW 4529/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Outline Business Case (OBC) for the Maze/Long

Kesh Programme has been passed by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) to the Department of Finance and Personnel for assessment. As a key component of the Programme the proposals for the International Centre for Conflict Transformation (ICCT) project are included within this. The content of the OBC has not been published by OFMDFM and I am therefore unable to provide details.

The responsibility for design of the ICCT lies with the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

European Funding Programmes

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the measures that are in place, within European Funding Programmes 2007-2013, to develop links between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQW 4585/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: European Funding Programmes are normally aimed at promoting the development of the regions in most need within the same member state rather than developing links between regions within the same member state. Northern Ireland's Competitiveness and Employment Programmes do not therefore contain specific objectives to develop links between UK regions.

European Funding Programmes are also available to promote cooperation between regions in different member states. The eligible area for the INTERREG IVA cross border programme comprises Northern Ireland, the Border Counties of the Republic and Western Scotland. It can support projects involving either Northern Ireland and the Border Region of the Republic of Ireland or projects involving all three regions and to this extent Northern Ireland can develop links with Western Scotland. The Programme has a total budget of €256 million.

Northern Ireland is one of the UK regions eligible for the 2007-13 INTERREG IVB Atlantic Area, Northern Periphery and North West Europe Transnational programmes and is also eligible for the EU-wide INTERREG IVC Programme. These programmes offer scope for Northern Ireland to work in partnership with other UK regions although eligible projects must involve partners from more than one member state.

In matters relating to INTERREG IVB and IVC, Northern Ireland liaises closely with other devolved administrations, central government and English regional government via structures managed by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

Northern Ireland Direct Project

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline what progress has been made in relation to the Northern Ireland Direct Project.
(AQW 4655/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Good progress has been made with the Northern Ireland Direct programme. The programme team has been established and the procurement for the first phase of NI Direct was initiated in January 2008 with a view to awarding the contract in summer 2008. The programme is on track to introduce the single telephone number point of contact for a small number of NICS organisations by December 2008.

Subject to receiving the necessary approvals, the intention would be to then move into a second phase of the programme to roll out the single telephone number point of contact to all remaining NICS Departments and Agencies on a phased basis.

As part of NI Direct, progress is also being made on developing an incident line capability, initially focusing on flooding. We plan to have this facility available by the end of the year.

Press Officers

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of press officers employed by his department.
(AQW 4678/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of Press Officers working in the Department is 5.

Benefits of Devolution

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail how the estimate that the average householder is £1000 better off under devolution than direct rule, was calculated.
(AQW 4691/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The estimate that the average householder will be £1,000 better off under devolution was based upon comparisons with the approach under Direct Rule, in terms of historic levels of domestic regional rate bills and planned level of water and sewerage charges over the period 2007-08 to 2010-11.

This calculation includes the following:

- Under Direct Rule:
 - Ministers had intended to phase in water and sewerage charges from 2007-08 without adjusting regional rate bills.

- Increases in the domestic regional rate were, on average, 9.8% per annum over the period 2002-03 to 2007-08 - this was assumed likely to continue over the budget period.
- Under the Executive:
 - It is planned that water and sewerage charges will be phased in from 2009-10, and in parallel there will be a one off reduction to the average regional rate bill of £160.
 - The domestic regional rate is to be frozen between 2008-09 to 2010-11.

In summary, this comparison highlights that the average household will benefit by some £1,000 over the period. The impact on individual households will, of course, depend on a range of variables including capital valuation, rate relief and reductions to water and sewerage bills, which will affect the bills and charges experienced by individual householders.

In addition, future decisions made by the Executive in terms of how water and sewerage charges are introduced may also affect this calculation.

Deprived Wards

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the 20 most deprived wards according to the index of multiple deprivation.
(AQW 4725/08)

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.

EU Peace Programme Funding

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount of EU Peace Programme funding that has been distributed in each of the last 5 years, broken down by local government district.
(AQW 4753/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The table below details the amounts of EU PEACE II funding awarded in each of the last five years, broken down by local government district. Projects in receipt of total

awards greater than £250,000 and assessed as likely to have a regional impact, have been excluded from the breakdown by local government district.

Local Government District	Total Amount Awarded (£m)				
	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
Antrim	2.4	14.1	1.0	0.0	0.7
Ards	1.3	1.9	1.1	0.2	2.1
Armagh	3.5	3.9	2.6	0.6	4.5
Ballymena	2.4	2.8	1.8	0.0	0.9
Ballymoney	1.0	1.4	0.7	0.0	0.7
Banbridge	0.3	0.4	1.1	0.3	1.0
Belfast	48.9	52.3	22.9	4.2	27.3
Carrickfergus	0.8	1.6	0.2	0.1	0.9
Castlereagh	1.6	1.2	1.4	0.0	1.2
Coleraine	4.1	14.2	2.0	0.1	1.3
Cookstown	2.0	1.8	1.2	0.4	1.2
Craigavon	5.6	3.1	2.5	0.1	2.1
Derry	9.1	13.2	6.1	2.2	7.4
Down	3.8	2.5	2.1	0.1	1.2
Dungannon	3.6	2.7	1.6	0.4	2.7
Fermanagh	6.2	7.4	4.0	1.1	2.1
Larne	1.3	2.6	1.1	0.1	0.6
Limavady	2.3	1.2	0.9	0.2	0.9
Lisburn	4.2	5.0	2.2	0.3	3.1
Magherafelt	1.6	4.8	1.0	0.7	1.1
Moyle	0.6	1.5	1.0	0.1	0.7
Newry & Mourne	3.5	7.9	3.1	0.7	3.3
Newtownabbey	4.8	2.0	0.6	0.2	0.6
North Down	1.0	17.4	1.2	0.0	0.9
Omagh	5.0	5.6	2.1	1.3	2.5
Strabane	3.2	8.6	1.7	0.1	2.4

Local Government District	Total Amount Awarded (£m)				
	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
Regional	23.8	55.4	4.2	2.1	0.9
Total	147.8	236.6	71.6	15.7	74.6

Pleural Plaques

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the criteria used to determine if sufferers of pleural plaques are entitled to compensation for asbestos exposure. (AQW 4763/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In October 2007 the House of Lords ruled, in the case of *Rothwell v. Chemical and Insulating Company* [2007] UKHL 39 and three other related cases. It determined that damages are no longer payable for symptomless pleural plaques caused by negligent exposure to asbestos.

The House of Lords did, however, leave open the option of a claim in contract, which would not require proof of damage, and the possibility of a claim where the pleural plaques is accompanied by physical symptoms (although that is considered rare).

Infant Deaths

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail, for each year since 1995, the number of (i) stillbirths; and (ii) neonatal deaths, that occurred at each hospital. (AQW 4803/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The tables attached give the number of stillbirths and neonatal deaths that occurred in each hospital in Northern Ireland, registered in each year since 1997. Prior to 1997 place of death/stillbirth from the civil register is not held electronically so overall figures have been provided.

TABLE: NUMBER OF STILLBIRTHS IN NORTHERN IRELAND, BY PLACE OF STILLBIRTH AND REGISTRATION YEAR, 1995-2006

Place of Stillbirth	1995 ¹	1996 ¹	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Altnagelvin Area Hospital			14	19	15	7	12	13	17	18	11	9
Antrim Area Hospital			21	14	11	9	9	9	15	10	13	3
Ards Hospital			2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Belfast City Hospital			7	13	18	6	1	0	0	0	0	0
Causeway Hospital			0	0	0	0	1	6	4	4	2	3

Place of Stillbirth	1995 ¹	1996 ¹	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Craigavon Area Hospital			14	7	14	9	7	9	16	8	13	11
Daisy Hill Hospital			9	11	9	9	9	11	5	5	5	4
Downpatrick Hospital			0	3	3	2	1	3	0	0	0	0
Erne Hospital			6	8	5	2	3	7	5	3	3	6
Lagan Valley Hospital			2	2	2	0	7	5	8	10	4	5
Mater Maternity Hospital			6	8	4	2	5	4	5	3	3	5
Mid-Ulster Hospital			4	2	2	0	2	4	0	3	4	3
Route Hospital			7	7	6	5	7	0	0	0	0	0
Royal Maternity Hospital			25	17	31	29	37	37	21	37	19	24
South Tyrone Hospital			5	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ulster Hospital			8	7	10	13	11	11	8	11	12	16
All Other Places			1	0	1	0	0	3	4	1	0	0
Total	145	153	131	122	132	93	112	122	108	113	89	89

¹ Information on place of stillbirth is only available electronically from 1997.

TABLE: NUMBER OF NEONATAL DEATHS IN NORTHERN IRELAND, BY PLACE OF DEATH AND REGISTRATION YEAR, 1995-2006

Place of Death	1995 ¹	1996 ¹	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Altnagelvin Area Hospital			8	14	7	7	7	9	6	6	17	4
Antrim Area Hospital			11	14	8	4	3	5	7	1	3	10
Ards Hospital			1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Belfast City Hospital			4	3	10	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Causeway Hospital			0	0	0	0	1	3	2	0	4	0
County Hospital			0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Craigavon Area Hospital			9	6	6	7	16	5	16	13	6	9
Daisy Hill Hospital			4	4	4	1	5	2	2	3	5	6
Downpatrick Hospital			1	1	1	0	1	2	0	0	0	0
Erne Hospital			4	4	3	1	0	2	3	1	3	3
Lagan Valley Hospital			1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Mater Maternity Hospital			1	1	4	2	2	0	0	0	0	
Mid-Ulster Hospital			1	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	1
Route Hospital			1	1	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	0
Royal Hospital Group			48	37	58	50	54	43	42	50	65	45
South Tyrone Hospital			1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ulster Hospital			4	3	7	4	3	0	7	3	5	8
All Other Places			3	3	3	2	4	0	1	5	3	3
Total	131	92	102	93	112	82	98	73	87	83	111	90

¹ Information on place of death is only available electronically from 1997.

Rates Relief

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the estimated liability of rates relief if it were to be taken up in full by those who are entitled to it. (AQW 4875/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The cost of rate relief if it were to be taken up in full by all those who are entitled to it is estimated to be in the region of £12m. This figure relates solely to the low income rate relief scheme which was introduced in April 2007.

Rates Relief

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the estimated number of people entitled to rates relief, broken down by district council area. (AQW 4876/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is estimated that there are approximately 40,000 ratepayers who are eligible for support through the low income rate relief scheme in Northern Ireland as a whole, compared to an estimated 19,000 who are currently in receipt of the relief. The information is not available to provide a reliable estimate of the number of people entitled within each district council area.

Pleural Plaques

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether or not the Executive plans to legislate to reverse the House of Lords judgement of 17 October 2007 in relation to Pleural Plaques. (AQW 4925/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In October 2007 the House of Lords ruled, in the case of *Rothwell v. Chemical and Insulating Company* [2007] UKHL 39 and three other related cases, that damages are no longer payable for symptomless pleural plaques caused by negligent exposure to asbestos.

The House of Lords did, however, leave open the option of a claim in contract, which would not require proof of damage, and the possibility of a claim where the pleural plaques is accompanied by physical symptoms (although that is considered rare).

The ruling has generated significant controversy and the UK Government and the Scottish Government have expressed different views on how it should be handled.

I am carefully considering the implications of the ruling for those in Northern Ireland who have been exposed to asbestos and have subsequently developed or been diagnosed with pleural plaques.

Before making any decision on the preferred way forward, I would wish to carefully consider all of the available options. I have, therefore, asked my officials to examine in more detail the ruling in *Rothwell* and its impact on people in Northern Ireland who have been diagnosed with pleural plaques.

Government Decentralisation

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail his intentions to promote decentralisation of Government departments. (AQO 2593/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: An independent review of policy on the location of public sector jobs, including civil service jobs, was established in December 2007. The review and the terms of reference were approved by the Executive as a means of helping Ministers to come to an agreed approach on the whole issue of dispersal of jobs. The review team has been asked to put forward a set of practical recommendations for the longer term approach to location in Northern Ireland and to propose an agenda for action. The terms of reference and membership of the review team can be accessed at

http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/review_of_policy_on_the_location_of_public_sector_jobs_in_ni.pdf

At this stage it is too early to speculate on the outcome. However, it is an opportune time to consider the distribution of public sector jobs generally in light of the Executive's clearly stated priority of encouraging private sector investment and growing the economy.

The review is due to report in Summer 2008 when the Executive will consider the team's findings and recommendations.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Prison Service Health Services

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the financial impact of the transfer of health services from the Northern Ireland Prison Service to his department over the next three years, as a figure and also as a proportion of his department's budget. (AQW 4587/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The table below

shows the funding allocated to prison healthcare services for the next three years:

	£	% of DHSSPS Budget
2008/2009	6,238,640	0.16
2009/2010	6,266,280	0.15
2010/2011	6,251,920	0.15

The total sum includes the funding which the NI Prison Service has transferred permanently to the DHSSPS baseline, and this includes an additional investment of £225k in additional mental health services, which my Department is matching from funds ring-fenced for prison healthcare in 2006/07. There will be no detrimental effect on existing Health and Social Care services.

Mental-Health Services

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount and proportion of the mental health services Budget, that has been spent on children and young people in the past five years. (AQW 4588/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The amount and proportion of the mental health budget spent on children and young people in the last five years is set out below:

	CAHMS	MH Budget	% of Total
2003/04	6,195,000	139,226,000	4.45%
2004/05	6,660,000	153,618,000	4.34%
2005/06	7,092,000	164,254,000	4.32%
2006/07	7,601,000	167,555,000	4.54%
2007/08	8,032,000	175,217,000	4.58%

Prison Service Health Services

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to accommodate the transfer of responsibility for the health of prisoners from the Northern Ireland Prison Service to his department. (AQW 4595/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below shows the funding allocated to prison healthcare services for the next three years:

	£	% of DHSSPS Budget
2008/2009	6,238,640	0.16
2009/2010	6,266,280	0.15
2010/2011	6,251,920	0.15

The total sum includes the funding which the NI Prison Service has transferred permanently to the DHSSPS baseline, and this includes an additional investment of £225k in additional mental health services, which my Department is matching from funds ring-fenced for prison healthcare in 2006/07. There will be no detrimental effect on existing Health and Social Care services.

Prison Service Health Services

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount that will be expended in preparation for the transfer of responsibility for the health of prisoners from the Northern Ireland Prison Service to his department. (AQW 4597/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below shows the funding allocated to prison healthcare services for the next three years:

	£	% of DHSSPS Budget
2008/2009	6,238,640	0.16
2009/2010	6,266,280	0.15
2010/2011	6,251,920	0.15

The total sum includes the funding which the NI Prison Service has transferred permanently to the DHSSPS baseline, and this includes an additional investment of £225k in additional mental health services, which my Department is matching from funds ring-fenced for prison healthcare in 2006/07. There will be no detrimental effect on existing Health and Social Care services.

Clostridium Difficile

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for each Health and Social Care Trust area, (i) the number of patients currently being treated for clostridium difficile; and (ii) the number of cases in which clostridium difficile was (a) a primary; and (b) a contributory, cause of death; and if figures are unavailable, to detail the reasons why this is the case. (AQW 4610/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) Current figures: on the morning of Friday 07 March 2008 the number of patients currently being treated for Clostridium Difficile for each Trust was:

Northern Trust	23
Western Trust	1
Belfast Trust	12
Southern Trust	6
South Eastern Trust	6

- (ii) Details of death certificate mentions of Clostridium difficile are in the tables below.

TABLE (A) — NUMBER OF DEATHS WITH CLOSTRIDIUM DIFFICILE MENTIONED AND RECORDED AS THE UNDERLYING CAUSE ON THE DEATH CERTIFICATE BY REGISTRATION YEAR 2001 – 2006 AND PLACE OF DEATH. NOTE: IN THE TABLE BELOW A = MENTION ONLY (CONTRIBUTARY), B = UNDERLYING (PRIMARY)

	2001		2002		2003		2004		2005		2006	
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
Northern Trust	3	1	3	1	3	3	2	0	5	5	8	3
Belfast Trust	0	1	6	5	6	4	9	7	3	3	6	5
Southern Trust	2	3	1	0	4	4	9	5	5	3	4	5
South Eastern Trust	1	2	3	3	2	3	2	7	4	6	10	3
Western Trust	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	0	0	7	2
Places of death other than hospitals	1	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	1	6	0
Totals	7	8	14	12	17	17	24	20	17	18	41	22

TABLE (B) — DEATHS REGISTERED WHERE CLOSTRIDIUM DIFFICILE WAS MENTIONED ON THE DEATH CERTIFICATE, 2007.

Place of Death	Quarter				2007p Total
	1	2	3	4	
Northern Trust	6	4	6	16	32
Belfast Trust	4	2	3	5	14
Southern Trust	2	2	1	2	7
South Eastern Trust	3	3	5	3	14
Western Trust	0	3	0	1	4

Place of Death	Quarter				2007p Total
	1	2	3	4	
Places of death other than hospitals	0	1	2	3	6
Total Mentions	15	15	17	30	77

p = Provisional Data

TABLE (C) — DEATHS REGISTERED WHERE CLOSTRIDIUM DIFFICILE WAS THE UNDERLYING CAUSE OF DEATH, 2007.

Place of Death (i.e. hospital in Trust area)	Quarter*		
	1	2	3
Northern Trust	4	1	3
Belfast Trust	3	1	1
Southern Trust	1	1	1
South East Trust	1	1	1
Western Trust	0	2	0
Place of death other than hospitals	0	0	2
Total Underlying	9	6	8

* Data for the final quarter of 2007 will be available in April 2008.

Breast-Screening Programme

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the Eastern Health and Social Services Board's breast screening programme this year to date; and to detail the backlog in the programme from previous years. (AQW 4611/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Eastern Health and Social Services Board expects that in the year 1 April 2007 to 31 March 2008, it will have screened over 16,200 women. Between 1 April 2006 and 31 March 2007 the Eastern Board screened 8,694 women in their screening unit.

The number currently waiting for screening in the Eastern Board area is approximately 7,400. The Board is now inviting 605 women per week to be screened, and 2,000 women in the Newcastle/Castlewellan area have recently been screened by arrangement with the Southern Board. It is expected that the backlog will be cleared by September 2008.

Clostridium Difficile

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of cases of clostridium difficile; and (ii) the number of

deaths from clostridium difficile, for each hospital in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area.
(AQW 4633/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) Number of cases of Clostridium Difficile for each hospital in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area:

Data published on 13 March by the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre (NI) show the following numbers of Clostridium difficile patient episodes, in patients 65 years and over, by hospital in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area, in 2007:

Antrim Area Hospital	149
Braid Valley Hospital	0
Causeway Hospital	38
Dalriada Hospital	2
Mid-Ulster Hospital	27
Moyle Hospital	0
Robinson Memorial Hospital	1
Whiteabbey Hospital	30

- (ii) Number of deaths from Clostridium Difficile for each hospital in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area:

Provisional data for the Northern Health and Social Services area, provided by the General Registers Office show:

- (a) Deaths registered where Clostridium difficile was mentioned on the Death Certificate, by place of death, in 2007, were as follows:

Antrim Area Hospital	18
Braid Valley Hospital	3
Causeway Hospital	2
Dalriada Hospital	0
Mid- Ulster Hospital	1
Moyle Hospital	0
Robinson Memorial Hospital	2
Whiteabbey Hospital	6.

- (b) Deaths registered where Clostridium difficile was the underlying cause of death, by place of death, for the first three quarters of 2007 were as follows:

Antrim Area Hospital	4
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Braid Valley Hospital	3
Causeway Hospital	0
Dalriada Hospital	0
Mid-Ulster Hospital	1
Moyle Hospital	0
Robinson Memorial Hospital	0
Whiteabbey Hospital	0

Data for the final quarter of 2007 will be available in April 2008.

Clostridium Difficile

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the action he is taking to ensure that front line staff have access to innovative technology to improve patient care in the management and containment of Clostridium difficile.
(AQW 4657/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In January I announced an additional £9 million for the fight against healthcare-associated infections. Some of this funding will contribute to the introduction of innovative technology to improve patient care in the management and containment of Clostridium difficile.

Control of Clostridium difficile requires a combined approach of control of antibiotic use, high standards of infection control and environmental cleanliness. New technologies do not remove the need for this combined approach. In February 2008 my Department issued to Trusts a summary list of available regional and national guidance and best practice on prevention and control of C. difficile infection.

A Safety Forum was set up in summer 2007 to help frontline staff to improve patient safety, drawing from internationally-proven best practice. Prevention of infection is a major part of the Safety Forum programme. This includes the promotion of the use of evidence based care bundles (high impact interventions) which include daily audits on each patient to ascertain if recommended guidelines have been adhered to. The audits include checking the standard of hand hygiene/antibiotic prescribing, decontamination, use of personal protective equipment and environmental cleanliness.

HSC Innovations was officially launched on Wednesday 17 October 2007. Its aim is to identify new technologies and services arising from research and clinical practice, and ensure they are properly developed to improve patient care. £1.5 million of

funding has been secured to create HSC Innovations. The additional funding was obtained through a bid to the Public Sector Research Exploitation Fund (£750,000), £550,000 from Invest Northern Ireland and £300,000 from the R&D Office.

Each of the Health and Social Care Trusts currently uses a range of measures involving innovative technologies to improve patient care in the management and containment of *C. difficile*. These include:

- use of sporicidal agents for decontamination of patient care equipment and for environmental cleaning;
- use of hydrogen peroxide technology for environmental decontamination,
- use of laboratory testing kits for the detection of cell wall antigen of the bacterium *C. difficile* and for *C. difficile* toxins

Tonsillectomy Procedures

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the hospitals which carry out children's tonsillectomy procedures (i) with; and (ii) without, a resident paediatrician. (AQW 4659/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: For the purposes of this Assembly Question the definition of a child has been taken as 14 and below but it should be noted that between the ages of 13 and 16 the individual needs of a patient may be taken into account in deciding whether to designate them as adult or paediatric.

Children's tonsillectomies are carried out on an inpatient or day case basis at the following hospitals:

- Belfast City Hospital
- Royal Victoria Hospital
- Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children
- Ulster Hospital
- Craigavon Hospital
- Daisy Hill Hospital
- Altnagelvin Hospital
- Tyrone County Hospital
- Antrim Hospital.

With the exception of Tyrone County each of all these hospitals has paediatric cover. Belfast City Hospital does not have resident paediatricians, however cover is provided by paediatricians based at the Royal Group of Hospitals which is within a mile

Tonsillectomy Procedures

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to compare the cost of a child's tonsillectomy procedure, now being provided at a private clinic, with the cost before the service was withdrawn from Tyrone County Hospital. (AQW 4660/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The average cost of a paediatric tonsillectomy commissioned from the private sector in 2007/08 ranges from £1030 to £2400.

It is not possible to distinguish between the cost of an adult tonsillectomy and the cost of a paediatric tonsillectomy performed at the Tyrone County Hospital.

Based on the most recent costs available it is estimated that the average cost of a tonsillectomy at Tyrone County Hospital was £1991 in 2007/08. This is the average of all tonsillectomies carried out at Tyrone County Hospital.

Ards Hospital

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of running the minor injury unit at Ards Hospital, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4665/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below shows the net revenue cost of the unit for the last three complete financial years.

Year	Net Revenue Cost £
2004/05	449,130
2005/06	522,085
2006/07	451,255

National Hip Fracture Database

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm if the National Hip Fracture Database will be implemented by all Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 4673/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: All Trusts that provide fracture services have plans in place to participate in the National Hip Fracture Database. I have been advised that the introduction of the database in Northern Ireland will take effect during the 2008/09 year.

Branches Medical Facility, Ballykelly

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that a public consultation exercise will be carried out before a decision is taken to close the Branches medical facility, Ballykelly. (AQW 4682/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The branch surgeries operated in Ballykelly by two GP practices based in Limavady, namely Dr McKenny & Partners (Scroggy Road Health Centre) and Dr McCleery & Partners (Bovally Medical Practice), closed with effect from 1 March 2008.

When considering the request from the GP practices to close these branch surgeries, the Western Health and Social Services Board held a public meeting on 27 October 2005, as well as conducting a survey amongst 9,751 patients registered with the two practices. 413 (4%) replied, the majority of whom wished the facility to remain open. In addition, meetings were also held with the Western Health and Social Services Council and the Western Local Medical Committee.

In considering the request to close the branch surgeries by the two GP practices, the Western Health and Social Services Board took account of the following factors:

- The physical accommodation and facilities within Ballykelly were poor;
- No chaperone facilities, receptionist cover or IT connections were available on site;
- Only a small number of people were attending the branch surgeries on a weekly basis, and did so mainly for repeat prescribing or minor ailments;
- Those patients requiring further or follow-up care had to attend the main surgeries in Limavady, subsequent to attendance at the branch surgeries.

Consequently, the Board decided to approve the practices' request. In so doing, however, it has imposed a number of conditions on the two GP practices designed to alleviate any inconvenience to the residents of Ballykelly, including that they should offer to patients from the Ballykelly area flexible appointments that coincide as far as possible with public transport availability. Arrangements are also being put in place so that patients can avail of repeat prescribing/dispensing and collection services from Community Pharmacies in Ballykelly.

The Board have no plans to invest in General Medical Services facilities in Ballykelly, which is less than four miles from Limavady, in the future.

As outlined above, the number of patients attending the branch surgeries were small; however, as these surgeries had no IT connections/facilities,

the practices do not have a record of the number of attendances on a monthly basis.

Branches Medical Facility, Ballykelly

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the future of the Branches medical facility, Ballykelly; and to detail the funding that will be allocated to the facility over the next 5 years. (AQW 4683/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The branch surgeries operated in Ballykelly by two GP practices based in Limavady, namely Dr McKenny & Partners (Scroggy Road Health Centre) and Dr McCleery & Partners (Bovally Medical Practice), closed with effect from 1 March 2008.

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Branches Medical Facility, Ballykelly

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patient consultations that have taken place at the Branches medical centre, Ballykelly, in each month of the last year. (AQW 4684/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The branch surgeries operated in Ballykelly by two GP practices based in Limavady, namely Dr McKenny & Partners (Scroggy Road Health Centre) and Dr McCleery & Partners (Bovally Medical Practice), closed with effect from 1 March 2008.

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Self-Harm Service

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to provide services to deal with self-harm in all areas of Northern Ireland, given the success of the North and West Belfast self-harm service. (AQW 4693/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am very concerned about the level of services for individuals at risk of self harm.

Responsibility for the assessment of the need for these services rests with the Health and Social Services Boards, who would commission such provision from the Health and Social Care Trusts or the independent sector. I am encouraging the Boards and Trusts to use some of the additional funds allocated for mental health through the increased budget settlement for the development of self-harm services over the next 3 years, where such need has been identified.

Mental-Health Wards

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the advice from the Royal College of Psychiatrists that a bed occupancy rate of 85% is necessary in mental health wards to provide appropriate care locally, for vulnerable and at risk patients. (AQW 4695/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am aware of the Royal College's advice, which represents a "gold standard" approach to provision. This is not always attainable, because, for example, for some individuals who are experiencing a mental health crisis, an emergency placement in hospital is the only and the most appropriate option.

The proposed investment in community mental health services over the next 3 years as a result of the additional funds allocated to mental health through the Comprehensive Spending Review will enable a further shift in the focus of provision away from in-patient care to care in the community.

Mental-Health Patients

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for each of the last 3 years, the number of mental health patients admitted as 'out of catchment' cases, broken down by (i) Health and Social Service Board area; and (ii) Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 4696/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) The number of mental health patients¹ admitted as 'out of catchment cases'² in each of the last three financial years, broken down by Health and Social Services Board area is outlined in the table below.

Health and Social Service Board Area	Number of patients admitted as 'out of catchment' cases		
	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Eastern	92	67	86
Northern	55	33	29
Southern	35	61	64
Western	22	20	21
Total	204	181	200

1. This is defined as patients admitted into an acute psychiatric bed/unit.
2. This relates to patients admitted to a provider Trust within each Health and Social Board who resided in another Health and Social Services Board area.

- (ii) The number of mental health patients¹, admitted as 'out of catchment cases'², in each of the last three financial years, broken down for each Trust³ that provides this service, is outlined in the table below:

Health and Social Service Trust	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Armagh & Dungannon	12	7	4
Belfast City Hospitals	124	96	82
Causeway	22	24	11
Craigavon & Banbridge Community	23	58	63
Down Lisburn	166	97	93
Homefirst	81	53	52
Mater Infirmorum	80	59	97
South & East Belfast	43	24	16
Sperrin Lakeland	104	94	78
Ulster Hospitals	10	15	1
Total	665	527	497

1. This is defined as patients admitted into an acute psychiatric

bed/unit.

2. This is defined as patients admitted from outside the catchment population of each legacy Trust.
3. Prior to April 2007, hospitals in Northern Ireland were organised into 18 Provider Trusts. The information in this answer relates to financial years 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07 and is thus provided on the basis each applicable 'legacy' Trust.

Breast-Screening Programme

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) when the recently announced breast screening extension for all women aged 50-70 years will start; and (ii) when there will be full implementation of the extension; and to make a statement on this issue. (AQW 4716/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The extension to the breast screening programme for all women aged 50-70 years will start during 2008/09.

The breast screening programme is a rolling one which invites women from GP practices in turn on a three year cycle. The full implementation of the extension will be complete by March 2012.

Autism Facilities

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has (i) to provide necessary facilities for people with autism; and (ii) to address the regional imbalance that currently exists within this sector. (AQW 4726/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I launched an independent review of autism health and social care services in September 2007. The review team is due to report to me by the end of March 2008. The information provided in that report will inform the development of policies for improved health and social care services for people with autism.

Mental-Health Services

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to respond to the gap in elderly mental health (Psychiatry of Old Age) services, in relation to the provision of service, training and support to (i) Accident and Emergency departments; and (ii) Medical and Surgical wards, within acute hospitals. (AQW 4739/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I recognise that creating psychiatric liaison services in our acute hospitals can be an

important means of improving the health outcomes for older people who have been admitted to A&E or Medical or Surgical wards, and who have co-existent mental health problems.

I have accepted the Bamford recommendations on this issue. Having acquired additional funding for their implementation following the budget negotiations, I will be expecting commissioners and providers of mental health services to use this increased settlement to prioritise the creation of psychiatric liaison services, as part of the overall development of mental health services for older people.

Respite Services

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to improve respite services for people with learning difficulties. (AQW 4802/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As a result of the funding secured under the Comprehensive Spending Review, additional resources have been earmarked to ensure improved access to learning disability care for children and adults by providing 200 new or enhanced respite packages by 2011.

Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the action he is taking to improve services for people with autistic spectrum disorder and their families. (AQW 4805/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I launched an Independent Review of autism health and social care services in September 2007. The review team are due to report to me by the end of March 2008. The information provided in that report will inform the development of policies for improved health and social care services to those people with autism.

Nurses Employed

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of nurses currently employed in the Belfast City Hospital; and (ii) the changes in numbers over the last 5 years. (AQW 4812/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the tables below.

TABLE 1: HEADCOUNT OF NURSES WITHIN BELFAST CITY HOSPITAL AT DECEMBER 2003-2007

	Dec-03	Dec-04	Dec-05	Dec-06	Dec-07	Change 2003-2007
Qualified Nurses	1363	1326	1387	1424	1393	2.2%
Unqualified Nurses	354	369	349	344	340	-4.0%

TABLE 2: WHOLE-TIME EQUIVALENT OF NURSES WITHIN BELFAST CITY HOSPITAL AT DECEMBER 2003-2007

	Dec-03	Dec-04	Dec-05	Dec-06	Dec-07	Change 2003-2007
Qualified Nurses	1145.79	1118.64	1180.47	1229.29	1202.12	4.9%
Unqualified Nurses	295.81	309.98	297.71	289.24	290.07	-1.9%

Source: Human Resources Management System

Notes:

1. Figures exclude nurse bank and agency staff.
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.

Smoking Order 2006

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) to confirm if the Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 applies outside the doors of hospitals; (ii) if the Order applies outside hospital, to what distance outside the doors it extends; and (iii) if the Order does not apply outside the doors of hospitals, to explain the reasons. (AQW 4827/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 is designed to protect the public and employees from exposure to tobacco smoke in enclosed and substantially enclosed public places and workplaces. The legislation therefore extends to hospital entrances/exits only where they are enclosed or substantially enclosed.

Regulation 2 of the Smoke-free (Premises, Vehicle Operators and Penalty Notices) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 specifies what "enclosed" and "substantially enclosed" mean. A copy of the regulations was placed in the Assembly Library. District Councils' Environ-

mental Health Departments can also offer advice on the meaning of enclosed and substantially enclosed.

Smoking at hospital entrances/exits not covered by smoke-free legislation is a matter for Trusts to address through their policies on smoking.

Smoking Order 2006

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how the Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 is enforced, and whether city and district council enforcement officials have access to hospital sites to enforce the Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. (AQW 4828/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 is designed to protect the public and employees from exposure to tobacco smoke in enclosed and substantially enclosed public places and workplaces. The legislation therefore extends to hospital entrances/exits only where they are enclosed or substantially enclosed.

Regulation 2 of the Smoke-free (Premises, Vehicle Operators and Penalty Notices) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 specifies what “enclosed” and “substantially enclosed” mean. A copy of the regulations was placed in the Assembly Library. District Councils’ Environmental Health Departments can also offer advice on the meaning of enclosed and substantially enclosed.

Smoking at hospital entrances/exits not covered by smoke-free legislation is a matter for Trusts to address through their policies on smoking.

Giant Team Brief

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the costs involved in the ‘Giant Team Brief’ training day run by the department for its staff last year; and (ii) how the outcomes of this day were evaluated. (AQW 4829/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There have been four Giant Team Briefs held between January and October 2007. These have been held for staff in the Department’s Social Policy Group. The total cost of staging these events was £6,400 (exc VAT).

The events were evaluated by attendees completing feedback forms which were subsequently analysed.

Opioid Use

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that statements made by Board Pharmacists to General Practitioners, in relation to opioid use in persistent non-cancer pain, are consistent with the guidelines produced by the British Pain Society. (AQW 4830/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am not aware that Board Pharmacy Advisers have made “statements” to General Practitioners about the use of opioids for non-cancer pain. Board Pharmacy Advisers will discuss prescribing issues with GPs and help them make appropriate decisions, but responsibility for determining the appropriate treatment to be provided to an individual patient remains a matter for the clinical judgement of the GP concerned, taking into account the patient’s presenting condition(s), medical history and wishes.

Any advice given by Board Pharmacy Advisers, whether generally to all GPs for example in Newsletters, or to specific GPs as part of particular discussions, will be based on the best practice and best available evidence, which may be drawn from several sources. These sources may include, for example, the British National Formulary, NICE, CREST or the National Prescribing Centre, which itself collates guidance from other sources or other groups.

Teenage Births

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) data available on teenage (under 20) births for 2006/2007; and (ii) the number of teenage women who travelled to England to have an abortion in 2006/2007. (AQW 4832/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information is only available by the latest calendar year for which information is available.

- (i) In 2006 there were 1,432 births registered to teenage mothers in Northern Ireland.
- (ii) In 2006, 213 teenage women travelled to England from Northern Ireland to have an abortion.

Psychiatric Liaison Service

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the steps taken in Health and Social Care Trusts, to involve the appropriate specialist services within liaison psychiatric services, to develop a coordinated

psychiatric liaison service for acute hospitals.
(AQW 4833/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and Social Care Trusts have arrangements in place to provide psychiatric liaison services to their acute hospitals, to help ensure that patients who also have psychological or psychiatric problems, are properly diagnosed and provided with appropriate treatment and support. I expect all Trusts, as part of their overall programme for improving mental health services, to build on local experience to date and on best practice elsewhere.

North West Independent Clinic

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4560/08, if he will undertake a review of the number of continuing care beds at the North West Independent Clinic with a view to reinstating the 15 beds originally located there. (AQW 4839/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Over the last 12 months the Western Health and Social Care Trust has invested in the development of intensive intermediate care services and rehabilitation services for residents of the Western Board area. The aim of this investment is to support people in their own homes and local communities so that the need to rely on hospital based care is reduced.

The Western Trust continues to fund 15 beds at the North West Independent Clinic, however, the Trust's assessment of the needs of the local population indicates that these would be best met by altering the profile of those beds from 15 continuing care beds to 12 continuing care beds and 3 nursing home beds. It is considered that this combination of service provision, allied with the investment in intermediate care services, will better meet the current needs of local people.

Waterside Facility

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4560/08, to detail the number of Limavady residents admitted to the Waterside facility for continuing care. (AQW 4840/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Western Trust has advised that during the period 1 January 2007 to 31 December 2007 there were 6 admissions to the North West Independent Clinic. 4 of these admissions were residents of the Limavady area.

North West Independent Clinic

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4560/08, to outline the criteria used in the decision to reduce the number of continuing care beds at the North West Independent Clinic. (AQW 4841/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is no reduction in the overall number of beds at the North West Independent Clinic currently funded by the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

It is the Department's policy that people should be supported to remain for as long as possible in their own homes without the requirement to avail of hospital provision. The Western Trust has recently invested in the development of intensive intermediate care services and rehabilitation services for residents of the Western Board area in support of that objective. The Western Trust continues to review service provision to ensure the most appropriate mix of health and social care services is provided to meet the needs of its local population. The Trust's assessment of those needs indicates that the resources available would be best utilised by adjusting the profile of the beds funded at the North West Clinic.

The current profile of beds funded at the North West Independent Clinic is 12 continuing care beds and 3 nursing home beds.

Acquired Brain Injuries

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount allocated to deal exclusively with acquired brain injuries, in the next three years. (AQW 4842/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The estimated spending on acquired brain injuries over the next three years, together with the amount spent in 2007 – 2008 is summarised in the table below. However allocations for the next three years are still being finalised.

	2007/08 (£k)	2008/09 (£k)	2009/10 (£k)	2010/11 (£k)
Totals	7471	7934	8095	8385

Brain Injuries

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment

of the of the work being carried out by Headway, the acquired brain injury association. (AQW 4843/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Headway is a charity set up to give help and support to people affected by brain injury and has a network of local Groups and Branches throughout Northern Ireland. The voluntary sector, including Headway, has an important part to play in partnership with the statutory sector in providing a wide range of services to people with a brain injury. These services include rehabilitation programmes, carer support, social re-integration, community outreach and respite care.

Acquired Brain Injuries

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount allocated in 2007/08 and 2008/09 by each of the Health and Social Care Trusts, for the provision of services to people with acquired brain injuries and their carers. (AQW 4844/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested on the amounts allocated for the provision of services to people with acquired brain injuries and their carers is not readily available as it is not possible to separately identify the amounts allocated to Trusts and for carers.

The estimated spending on acquired brain injuries for 2007/08 and 2008/09 is summarised in the table below. However allocations for 2008/09 are still being finalised.

	2007/08 (£k)	2008/09 (£k)
Totals	7471	7904

Brain Injuries

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people with acquired brain injuries that currently use the brain injury units in each of the Health and Social Care Trust areas. (AQW 4845/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the form requested.

Brain Injuries

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people employed solely to deal with acquired brain

injuries in each of the Health and Social Care Trust areas. (AQW 4846/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in Table 1 below. It is important to be aware that these staff represent only a small subset of the total staff in Trusts who treat patients with acquired brain injuries but who additionally provide care for patients with other conditions.

TABLE 1: HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE STAFF EMPLOYED SOLELY TO DEAL WITH PERSONS WITH ACQUIRED BRAIN INJURIES BY TRUST

HSC Trust	Headcount ¹	WTE ^{1,2}
Belfast ³	77	66.85
Northern	21	17.01
Southern	9	6.31
South Eastern	15	9.75
Western	12	N/A

Notes:

1. Includes staff such as consultants, allied health professional staff, nurses and social work staff. Administrative staff are excluded.
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.
3. Figures for the Belfast Trust include staff at the Regional Acquired Brain Injury Unit at Musgrave Park Hospital.
4. The Western Trust figures include 6 contracted staff from Leonard Cheshire and the Cedar Foundation.

Bereavement Support

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of money to provide counselling and support to families bereaved by suicide (i) expended in the last financial year; and (ii) allocated for the next financial year; and whether this money in each of the parliamentary constituencies was provided through (a) statutory provision; or (b) voluntary provision. (AQW 4857/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below outlines the Community Support Package funding allocated in the 2007/08 year by Health and Social Services Boards in relation to counselling and support for bereaved families. This information shows voluntary and statutory provision and is only available by Board area. It is not possible at present to provide information on allocations for the next financial year as the Boards are currently finalising funding arrangements for 2008/09.

Board Area	Funding 07/08	
	Voluntary	Statutory
Eastern Board	£20867	£25816
Northern Board	£57217	Nil
Southern Board	£69500	Nil
Western Board	£3500	£60000

Health and Social Services Boards also fund a range of organisations and projects delivering counselling and support services generally. These services can include counselling and support for families bereaved by suicide but are not targeted specifically at this group of people.

Breast Cancer

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of HER2 positive early stage breast cancers among women that have been diagnosed, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4858/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The use of the breast cancer drug trastuzumab (Herceptin) is predicated on the HER2 status of the patient. Since Herceptin did not become available for use in early stage breast cancer until November 2005 the numbers of women tested before that time is small. Since early 2006 all women diagnosed with early stage invasive breast cancer are tested for HER2 status.

Because of variation in the method of recording patient information in Trusts it has not been possible to accurately determine the number of early stage breast cancers which tested positive for HER2 in each of the last five years. However, in Northern Ireland about 1000 cases of breast cancer are diagnosed each year of which 15% to 25% are likely to be HER2 positive.

Breast Cancer

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of HER2 positive early stage breast cancers among women that have been treated with the drug Trastuzumab (Herceptin), in each of the last five years. (AQW 4859/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Since trastuzumab did not become widely available for use in early stage breast cancer until November 2005 the numbers of women treated before that time is small. Since late 2005 all women diagnosed with early stage HER2 positive

invasive breast cancer are eligible for treatment with trastuzumab, however for clinical reasons not all HER2 positive patients receive it.

	Patients treated
2007	86
2006	101
2005	22

Breast Cancer

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of women diagnosed with cancer that have been tested for HER2 (i) from October 2005 to present; and (ii) over 2003-2004. (AQW 4860/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Since trastuzumab did not become available for use in early stage breast cancer until November 2005 the numbers of women tested before that time is smaller. Since early 2006 all women diagnosed with early stage invasive breast cancer are tested for HER2 status.

October 2005 to present	3760
2003 and 2004	1126

Soya in Foods

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm if there is any medical evidence that foods containing soya could pose a health risk to women with high levels of HER2 protein. (AQW 4861/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Food Standards Agency is not aware of any human epidemiological studies that have specifically examined the health effects of soya, or phytoestrogens found in soya, on women with high levels of HER2 protein. The very limited preliminary animal and in vitro studies published to date are suggestive of a possible beneficial effect, but the data are too limited to permit any firm conclusions to be drawn.

Soya in Foods

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm if he will carry out an investigation into the potential harmful effects that soya may have on the long-term health of society. (AQW 4862/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public

Safety: The Food Standards Agency has previously asked the independent advisory Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT) to review all the available scientific and medical literature on potential risks and benefits of phytoestrogens, the biologically active chemicals contained in soya. The COT published its advice in 2003, including a number of recommendations for research to address uncertainties in the available data. In response the Food Standards Agency has funded several research projects which are currently ongoing. The COT will reassess the safety of phytoestrogens when these projects are complete.

Fire Stations

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give a timescale within which new fire stations will be built in Limavady and Coleraine. (AQW 4863/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer to the answer I gave during Oral Questions on 25 February to a supplementary question asked by David McClarty. I indicated that as far as Coleraine and Limavady were concerned they are on the list of stations for upgrade, but they are not listed for priority action for the next three years.

Elder Abuse

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of instances of elder abuse recorded in each of the past five years. (AQW 4873/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested was not available centrally. Health and Social Services Boards were asked to provide numbers of allegations of abuse reported in their areas over the past 5 years. Information about allegations of abuse of older people is set out in the table below:

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
NHSSB	39	28	41	49	51
SHSSB	35	41	42	68	76
EHSSB	60	105	76	94	217
WHSSB*	unavailable	unavailable	21	80	62

* Figures for the Western Health and Social Services Board are for adults of all ages. Numbers of older people are not available separately.

Childminder Start-Up Package

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his consideration of the Northern Ireland Childminding Association's proposed childminder start-up package; and what action he intends to take in relation to these proposals. (AQW 4874/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Policy responsibility in respect of childminding transferred from my Department to DE in November 2006 with Early Years policy, including funding to support the Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA). DHSSPS remain responsible for the regulation and inspection of childminders, which incorporates registration.

NICMA's proposed childminder start-up package falls within DE policy responsibility and is currently being considered by DE in relation to the review of Early Years. My colleague, Caitriona Ruane, is meeting Bridget Nodder, Director of NICMA, on 12 March 2008 to discuss the work being undertaking by that organisation.

Prison Healthcare

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the plans his department has to take on the provision of healthcare in prisons. (AQW 4905/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Eastern HSS Board will commission prison healthcare services on a regional basis in 2008/09. The Regional Health and Social Care Board will assume this responsibility once it is established. The South Eastern HSC Trust will assume responsibility for the delivery of healthcare services at Magilligan, Maghaberry and Hydebank Wood from 1 April 2008. The Trust is at an advanced stage of recruiting a new Assistant Director to lead on prison healthcare issues. There have been a series of meetings between the Trust, EHSSB and NI Prison Service to finalise arrangements for the transfer.

My Department is currently involved in negotiations with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, Eastern HSS Board and NI Prison Service over a draft Partnership Agreement on prison healthcare services. This document will set out the roles and responsibilities of the respective partners in this service.

Neighbourhood Renewal Areas

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, in addition to his

department's mainstream responsibilities, the resources that have been allocated to (i) Neighbourhood Renewal Areas; and (ii) the Strabane Neighbourhood Renewal Area, in each of the last 2 years. (AQW 4911/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and Social Care, as represented by Boards, Trusts and Investing for Health structures, works closely with DSD and the Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships to support the development and implementation of Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans.

While a wide variety of HSC activity is thus underway in Neighbourhood Renewal areas, it is difficult to quantify accurately the resources skewed towards Neighbourhood Renewal areas in addition to mainstream.

The best estimate of the additional funding allocated by Health over the past two years across Neighbourhood Renewal areas is £957k in 2006/07 and £1.83m in 2007/08. It is stressed that these figures are likely to significantly underestimate the true picture. For example it does not accurately reflect the investment in terms of staff time.

In the Western Board area much of the Neighbourhood Renewal activity spans across other Neighbourhood Renewal areas as well as Strabane. A broad estimate of the additional investment for the last two years, based on a proportionate amount depending on the total number of Neighbourhood Renewal areas covered by each initiative is £ 42,455 in 2006/07 and £ 102,246 in 2007/08.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm if the tender process for the new private finance initiative hospital at Enniskillen has been completed; and to provide details of the successful tender. (AQW 4912/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Private Finance Initiative tender process for the South West Acute Hospital north of Enniskillen is not yet complete. The Competitive Dialogue procurement stage of this project has recently completed and the final bids from the 3 bidding consortia were received by the Western HSC Trust at the end of February 2008. These bids are currently being evaluated and following selection of a Preferred Bidder, formal award of the tender is expected to be made in November 2008. The new Acute Hospital is expected to be constructed by early 2012.

Road Traffic Accidents

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of road traffic accidents involving Fire Service and Ambulance vehicles on operational duty; and (ii) the number of injuries and fatalities which occurred as a result of these accidents, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4915/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is displayed in the tables below:

ROAD TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS INVOLVING NORTHERN IRELAND FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE (NIFRS) AND NORTHERN IRELAND AMBULANCE SERVICE (NIAS) VEHICLES ON OPERATIONAL DUTY.

	03/04	04/05	05/06	06/07	2007- Present
2003/4 to 2007/Present					
Number of Collisions + Involving NIFRS Vehicles	76	54	69	71	69
Number of Collisions Involving NIAS Vehicles	60	55	72	61	39

NUMBER OF INJURIES AND FATALITIES ON OPERATIONAL DUTY REPORTED BY NIFRS 2003/04 TO 2007/PRESENT

	03/04	04/05	05/06	06/07	2007- Present
Injuries to public	4*	3*	9*	1*	1*
Injuries to NIFRS Personnel	11	5	6	11	1
Fatalities – public	0	0	0	0	0
Fatalities – NIFRS personnel	0	0	0	0	0

+ NIFRS figures include appliances, Officers' cars and vans.

* The figures relate to injuries reported at the time of the incident and do not include injuries that may be reported at a later date.

The number of injuries and fatalities for ambulance service accidents could be produced by NIAS only at disproportionate cost

Mental-Health Services

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give his assessment of whether adequate provision has been made for a step change in the quality of mental health services. (AQO 2640/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Bamford Review sets out the

vision for the reform and modernisation of mental health services over the next 10 to 15 years.

The additional funds allocated to mental health in the Comprehensive Spending Review represent an increase of over 12% on current spend over the next 3 years and will allow for a number of key developments to be taken forward, which will make a real and lasting difference to patients, their carers and families.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome Funding

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that he will provide more funding for fibromyalgia and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/M.E. (AQW 4940/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and social care resources are normally allocated on a service or Programme of Care basis rather than by specific medical condition. It is a matter for commissioners to make decisions regarding the allocation of resources to specific services and proposals for service development.

No specific funding is therefore allocated for people who suffer from fibromyalgia, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/ME. The variability of symptoms in patients means that they will need to access different disciplines of the health service. A range of treatment and support options are available and will depend on the patients' specific symptoms and their severity.

Liaison Psychiatry Faculty

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps he is taking to ensure that his department is working with the Liaison Psychiatry Faculty of the Royal College of Psychiatrists for the effective delivery of mental health liaison services to emergency departments. (AQW 4971/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Developing any aspect of our health services, including psychiatric liaison, is a partnership process between my Department, the Health and Social Care Boards and Trusts, and the relevant professional bodies. It is important that professionals working in this area have the appropriate competencies. To ensure this, there are a number of agencies involved in this process, for example, the Postgraduate Medical Education and Training Board, which develops standards and requirements for postgraduate medical education and training in the UK, and the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency, which funds and manages the agreed training programmes. Working with these agencies, the Liaison Faculty of the Royal College of

Psychiatrists has a direct input into the standards and training programmes for their particular specialty.

Mental-Health Services

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to address the gap in general adult mental health services, in relation to the provision of service, training and support to (i) Accident and Emergency departments; and (ii) Medical and Surgical wards, within acute hospitals. (AQW 4972/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Psychiatric Liaison has only been recognised relatively recently as a separate speciality and psychiatric liaison services, while expanding, remain underdeveloped throughout the United Kingdom. However, the value and need for such services is now well recognised and I expect to see all our Trusts prioritise the development of psychiatric liaison services, as part of the overall Bamford reform programme, building on local experience to date and on best practice elsewhere.

Prescription Forms

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of prescription forms that have been lost in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 4978/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is no mechanism in place either within the Department or the Central Services Agency for identifying the number of prescription forms which have been issued by a General Practitioner, or other practitioner qualified to do so, and not presented to a pharmacist for dispensing.

Wind Turbines

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to explore the possibility of erecting wind turbines at hospitals, similar to the turbine located at Antrim Area Hospital. (AQW 4983/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and Social Care Trusts, through their efforts to meet government targets on the reduction of carbon emissions within their estates, have been pro-active in seeking to evaluate the erection of wind turbines where appropriate, such as on the Causeway Hospital, Altnagelvin Hospital and Gransha Hospital sites.

Health and Social Care Trusts will be encouraged through the forthcoming publication of the Health Estates, Sustainable Development Design Brief, to show evidence of having considered the option of installing a wind turbine on all new health and social care developments.

Staff Salary Payments

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to follow the Scottish Executive's example of providing protection to staff salary payments resulting from them being assimilated to Agenda for Change.

(AQW 4986/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and Social Care staff are being given pay protection at the rate of pay in payment on 1 April 2005 regardless of the date on which they are moved to the new Agenda for Change rates of pay. This is in keeping with the arrangements set out in the Agenda for Change Agreement. I have no plans to follow the Scottish Executive's example of providing protection. Under our local Government Accounting rules there is no flexibility to write off excess payments from public funding.

Botulism in Cattle

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cases of infections of humans, as result of botulism in cattle, in the last 10 years.

(AQW 4995/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There have been no laboratory reports in Northern Ireland of C botulinum in humans that may be associated with cattle.

Public Appointments

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of public appointments that have been made by his department since the restoration of devolution; and (ii) the number that were (a) female; and (b) elected councillors.

(AQW 5016/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: During the period 8 May 2007 to 13 March 2008, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety have made 20 public appointments, of which 8 were female and 4 were elected councillors.

Out-of-Hours Service

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give assurances in relation to the future of the out of hours doctor service in Limavady.

(AQW 5025/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Currently all Out of Hours (OOH) services in Northern Ireland are subject to a review looking at their efficiency and effectiveness. As the review will not be published until May this year no decisions have been made regarding future provision of Out of Hours services.

Although, at this time, no commitment can be given that there will be no change to the OOH service in Limavady in the future, Western Health and Social Services Board officers have given undertakings that they will engage with key stakeholders if any changes are proposed.

Respite Care

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to provide a respite centre for children and adults with severe disabilities, in the Newtownards and Bangor areas.

(AQW 5034/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust currently provides a dedicated children's respite unit at Conlig which supports families caring for young people with complex health needs up to 18 years of age. The Trust is currently working with EHSSB colleagues to explore options and to identify funding for the development of a dedicated new unit for young adults over 18 years of age in the greater Bangor area. This is at planning stage at present.

The Trust also contracts with a range of independent and voluntary sector providers to purchase respite beds in Nursing Home and Residential facilities and are seeking to increase this provision by one bed in the Bangor area. However not all families want overnight respite away from home and the Trust is working to extend the opening hours of Statutory Day Centres to offer families extended day and evening support as an alternative form of valued respite.

Respite Care

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people in (i) the Ards District Council area; and (ii) the Strangford constituency; who required respite care in 2006 and 2007.

(AQW 5037/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the form requested.

Car-Parking Charges

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the action he is taking to abolish car parking charges at hospitals.
(AQW 5038/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am reviewing existing arrangements and I will be making an announcement on car parking provision and management shortly.

Official Visits

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the protocols he follows in informing MLAs that he will be visiting their respective constituencies.
(AQW 5074/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can advise that my private office staff contact the relevant MLA's constituency office at least 24 hours before visiting their respective constituency area on a given date. MLA's are advised of the purpose, location and timing of the visit.

This is in line with the Assembly guidance of 12 February 2008 issued by the Speaker.

Brangam and Bagnall Case

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to indicate when he would expect to be in a position to report to the Assembly on the Brangam and Bagnall case.
(AQW 5080/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As legal proceedings are currently ongoing in relation to this case it would be inappropriate to make a statement on when it may be resolved.

Visit to Ballybeen

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail when and how he informed the Northern Ireland Housing Executive of his visit to Ballybeen on Monday 10 March 2008.
(AQW 5091/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I did not inform the Northern Ireland

Housing Executive of my visit to Ballybeen on Monday 10 March 2008.

Visit to Ballybeen

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail when and how he informed the East Belfast Partnership of his visit to Ballybeen on Monday 10 March 2008.
(AQW 5092/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I did not inform the East Belfast Partnership of my visit to Ballybeen on Monday 10 March 2008.

NHS Dental Services

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the action his department is taking to increase access to NHS dental services for patients.
(AQW 5094/08)

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. 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 on this issue.

In the interim, and in an effort to stem the flow of dentists from Health Service dentistry into private work, I announced on the 17th September 2007 an injection of £4.4 million into health service dentistry aimed at addressing access problems reported in many parts of the province. £400k of this £4.4m has been made available to the four Boards to help to grow the salaried dental sector, although this process has been slow to date. If salaried dentists can be successfully recruited by each of the four Health Boards, the additional dentists provided will go some considerable way towards addressing dental access problems throughout Northern Ireland.

NHS Dental Services

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of dental practices in the North Down constituency;

and (ii) the number of these that offer NHS treatment.
(AQW 5095/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No information is available centrally with regard to the number of dental practices that exclusively provide private treatment. At December 2007, Central Services Agency figures show that there were 22 dental practices with registered NHS patients in the North Down constituency. It is not known how many of these currently offer NHS treatment, however all 22 practices registered new NHS patients during 2007.

NHS Dental Services

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of dental practices in the Northern Ireland; and (ii) the number of these that offer NHS treatment.
(AQW 5096/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No information is available centrally with regard to the number of dental practices that exclusively provide private treatment. At December 2007, Central Services Agency figures show there were 358 dental practices with registered NHS patients in Northern Ireland. It is not known how many of these currently offer NHS treatment, however, 343 registered new NHS patients during 2007. Seven of the practices that did not register NHS patients during 2007 were orthodontic practices and did treat patients on the NHS on a referral basis for specialist treatments. The remaining eight practices did not register new NHS patients during the year.

Childminders

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the plans he has to review, and where necessary reform, the registration process for child minders. (AQW 5114/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Policy responsibility in respect of childminding transferred from my Department to DE in November 2006 with Early Years policy, including funding to support the Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA). DHSSPS remains responsible for the regulation and inspection of childminders, which incorporates registration.

NICMA's proposed childminder start-up package falls within DE policy responsibility and is currently being considered by DE in relation to the review of Early Years.

My Department fully recognises the importance of registration to all those interested in becoming childminders. To ensure this is being carried out effectively, I have asked Senior Officials to meet with health and social care colleagues within the Boards to discuss the issue in full and establish what measures are being taken to address the concerns raised.

In addition Senior Officials will be meeting with the Director of the Northern Ireland Childminding Association to discuss the organisations recent survey and concerns raised.

Suicide Helpline

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the evaluation that was carried out on the pilot project which led to the decision to roll out the regional suicide helpline.
(AQW 5117/08)

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 made to the pilot helpline and because there was clear demand emerging from elsewhere in Northern Ireland. In reaching 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 regional service, which provides 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 help shape the future operation of the regional helpline and its associated counselling and support services. While we continue the modernisation of our local mental health provision, the helpline will provide immediate and much needed help for vulnerable people across Northern Ireland at times of crisis in their lives.

Suicide Helpline

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the tendering process that led to the decision to award the contract to operate the regional suicide helpline to Contact Youth.
(AQW 5118/08)

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 Department of Finance and Personnel's Central Procurement Directorate, 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.

Occupational Therapy Treatment

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the reasons why (i) the occupational therapy treatment at (a) Elmbrook Special School; and (b) Erne Special School, Enniskillen, was stopped on 25 January 2008; and (ii) each school was informed of the decision by telephone only. (AQW 5129/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Western Health and Social Care Trust has confirmed that paediatric occupational therapy treatment has not been stopped at Elmbrook Special School or Erne Special School, Enniskillen. The Occupational Therapy Department at Enniskillen, in line with the whole Western Health and Social Care Trust, is currently redesigning its workload to make optimum use of the Occupational Therapists to provide a suitable and cost effective service to the schools and to the community.

Neurological Disorders

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the respite care available to people aged between 30 and 65, who have suffered from stroke or neurological disorders, broken down by Health and Social Services Board area. (AQW 5131/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Centre in Ballycastle is a dedicated respite care facility for those suffering from MS and all four Health and Social services Boards contract respite bed days from this Centre. Apart from this, there are no dedicated respite care services available specifically for those aged

between 30 and 65 who have suffered from stroke or neurological disorders.

However, all four Health and Social Services Boards secure respite provision for this client group in a range of ways. Such care takes many different forms and it is delivered in care settings ranging from people's own homes, day facilities and residential and nursing care homes. It may be provided to meet the user's own needs or the needs of carers and families and take the form of a flexible short term response in the usual care setting or involve a stay in an alternative setting.

Direct payments are also offered as an option by which respite care can be availed of in a more flexible, supported and person centred manner.

Emergency Calls

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for (i) 2006; (ii) 2007; and (iii) 2008, the number of emergency calls for ambulances that were made in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area, broken down by district council area. (AQW 5132/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is shown in the table below:

Council Area	2006	2007	2008 (Jan – Feb)
Antrim	3,002	3,462	623
Ballymena	3,539	3,886	683
Ballymoney	1,369	1,444	263
Carrickfergus	2,390	2,446	438
Coleraine	3,784	4,006	635
Cookstown	1,870	2,015	370
Larne	1,723	1,858	337
Magherafelt	1,879	2,165	391
Moyle	916	1,056	173
Newtownabbey	4,775	4,889	785

Note: The above information may be subject to amendment following Northern Ireland Ambulance Service's routine data cleanse of its information management systems and databases.

Doctor-on-Call Service

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of calls that were made to the Dalriada 'Doctor On Call'

service; and (ii) the action taken on those calls, over the last 6 months. (AQW 5133/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below details the breakdown of calls made to the Dalriada Urgent Care Out of Hours service for the most recent 6 month period.

**DALRIADA URGENT CARE
CALL VOLUMES SEPT 2007 - FEB 2008**

	Adv	%	PCC	%	H/V	%	Total
Sep-07	4640	50.4	3662	39.8	898	9.8	9200
Oct-07	4685	50.9	3701	40.2	817	8.9	9203
Nov-07	4794	51	3759	40	852	9.1	9405
Dec-07	7083	50.3	5824	41.4	1174	8.3	14081
Jan-08	5271	50.5	4201	40.3	958	9.2	10430
Feb-08	5066	50.6	4082	40.8	856	8.6	10004
Total	31539	50.6	25229	40.5	5555	8.9	62323

Adv = Telephone Advice

PCC = Primary Care Centre attendances

H/V = Home Visits

Doctor-on-Call Service

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the criteria that is used by the Dalriada 'Doctor On Call' service to refer a case to the ambulance service or emergency services. (AQW 5134/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: All emergency and urgent calls received in Dalriada Urgent Care are passed immediately to the triage nurses. The triage nurse will ring the patient back straight away and depending on the patients' symptoms, will, with the help of computer assisted software, use their clinical judgement to decide whether referral to the ambulance service is required. If an ambulance is needed the nurse dealing with the case will telephone the ambulance service and make the referral themselves.

Registered Patients

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for the years (i) 1998; (ii) 2003; and (iii) 2008, the number of patients registered to medical practices in the (a) Mid Ulster constituency; (b) Magherafelt District Council area; and (c) Cookstown District Council area. (AQW 5135/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The total number of patients registered to medical practices located in the requested areas for each year is shown in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1: PATIENTS REGISTERED WITH MEDICAL PRACTICES BY AREA¹

	1999 ²	2003	2008
(a) Mid Ulster Constituency	78,344	78,458	83,034
(b) Magherafelt District Council	37,808	38,720	39,580
(c) Cookstown District Council	30,723	31,889	34,944

¹ Practices are assigned to an area based on the postcode of the practice using the 2007 central postcode directory

² Data are not available at 1998. The earliest data available are for October 1999.

Source: Central Services Agency

Ambulance Service

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for the years (i) 2006; (ii) 2007; and (iii) 2008, (a) the percentage of calls in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area to the ambulance service that were responded to by a vehicle other than an ambulance; and (b) the criteria used to decide the type of vehicle to be dispatched. (AQW 5136/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The following table sets out the requested information for emergency 999 calls:

	2006	2007	2008 (Jan – Feb)
Type of Vehicle	% calls attended		
Rapid Response Vehicle/ Officer car	4.4%	7.3%	11.8%
Patient Care Service vehicle	0.2%	0.1%	0.2%
Voluntary Agency Vehicle*	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%

* St John Ambulance

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service will always dispatch the nearest available A&E resource to an incident. If the initial response is not an A&E ambulance, the subsequent clinical call categorisation by Ambulance Control will determine whether an A&E ambulance is also required.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Sewerage Systems

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what plans his department has to upgrade the drainage and sewerage systems at Leestone Road, Kilkeel. (AQW 4614/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it has completed a Drainage Area Study for Kilkeel, which included an examination of the structural condition and capacity of the sewerage system serving Leestone Road. The Study recommended the upgrade of the sewer in Leestone Road to prevent out-of-sewer flooding. However, owing to competing priorities, work is unlikely to commence before 2011.

Although NIW is satisfied that the sewerage system in the Leestone Road area has adequate capacity to operate effectively under normal conditions, an anti-flood valve has recently been installed on the sewer to reduce the risk of flooding during periods of extreme rainfall.

My Department's Roads Service has confirmed that there are six gullies over a 90 metre stretch of the adopted part of Leestone Road. These gullies and associated pipe work have recently been maintained and are operating effectively. It is considered that this section of road is adequately drained and at present there are no proposals to improve the road drainage system at this location. However, Roads Service is aware of an area, just beyond this section of the Leestone Road, where there have been instances of flooding, but this area has not been adopted as part of the road network.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development to give an update on the progress of the improvement work being undertaken by Northern Ireland Water at Victoria Market, Derry/Londonderry, and to outline what consideration has been given to carrying out this work on a 24-hour basis. (AQW 4625/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that work to upgrade the Victoria Market Pumping Station in Derry/Londonderry is currently on programme for completion by the end of 2008. The estimated cost of the scheme is £3.8 million.

Work to lay three large diameter sewers from the River Foyle to the pumping station is being completed

in two phases. Phase one runs from the River Foyle to the Harbour Square Roundabout and has required the implementation of a traffic management arrangement. Work is ahead of programme and Northern Ireland Water has received positive feedback from my Department's Roads Service about traffic flows.

Northern Ireland Water aims to keep the timescale of pipelaying to a minimum during both phases, but has not considered undertaking the work on a 24 hour basis because it would increase both the cost of the project and operatives exposure to health and safety risks.

Information Signage

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the plans he has to improve the signage and information to alert motorists when the Foyle Bridge in Derry/Londonderry is closed. (AQW 4627/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that it intends to erect an additional Variable Message Sign on the Coshquin approach to the Skeoge Roundabout, to advise motorists entering the city from the Buncrana /Letterkenny direction, when the Foyle Bridge is closed or subject to restrictions.

On completion of the works, Variable Message Signs will be in place on all major approaches to the city. There are no plans to erect any further signs at this time.

Work in Mallusk

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the work being carried out by the Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water in Mallusk, and the surrounding areas, during March 2008. (AQW 4629/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Departments Roads Service officials advise that during March work will continue on the M2 Improvements Scheme between Sandyknowes and Greencastle junctions.

Following demolition of the Hightown Bridge construction of the replacement structure will be progressed in March. This will involve excavation and construction work to the new bridge abutments on the northern and southern sides of the motorway.

Other elements of the M2 improvement scheme, that will be undertaken during March, include the erection of safety barrier on the motorway verge between Sandyknowes and Hightown Bridge, the erection of an anti-dazzle fence along Derry Road, and resurfacing at the Sandyknowes city-bound onslip.

During March there will be temporary traffic management arrangements on the M2 hard shoulder to facilitate the installation of an additional traffic sign for the bus lane. Routine maintenance work on the M2 will also continue during March. This will involve gully cleaning, emergency telephone and communications cabinet cleaning, and small scale carriageway patching.

Northern Ireland Water have advised that they have no work planned in Mallusk, or the surrounding areas, during March.

Sewerage Infrastructure

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the investment in sewerage infrastructure in the Lisburn City Council area for (i) 2005-06; (ii) 2006-07; and (iii) 2007-08; and the planned investment in 2008-09. (AQW 4630/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that over the three financial years to 2007/08 it has invested almost £8.5 million in the sewerage infrastructure for the Lisburn City Council area, with a further £11.4 million expenditure planned for 2008/09. The annual breakdown is as follows:-

Year	Investment £000's
2005/06	3,216
2006/07	885
2007/08	4,332
2008/09	11,419

Work in Randalstown

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the work being carried out by the Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water in Randalstown, and the surrounding areas, during March 2008. (AQW 4631/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service officials and Northern Ireland Water have advised that no work is planned in Randalstown and the surrounding areas during March.

Work in Crumlin

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any work being carried out by the Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water in

Crumlin, and the surrounding areas, during March 2008. (AQW 4632/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service officials advise that traffic calming schemes will be completed on Main Street, Crumlin and on Glenavy Road. Work will also be completed on Main Street, Crumlin during March to assist bus boarding. Northern Ireland Water advise that they have no work planned in Crumlin, or the surrounding areas, during March.

Road Signage

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount of money his department has spent on (i) new; and (ii) replacement, road signage in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 4690/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The information the Member requests is not readily available, because my Department's Roads Services does not maintain composite records of expenditure on road signs, which distinguishes between those which are new and those which are replacements.

Train Stations/Halts

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number; (ii) the names; and (iii) the locations, of closed/disused train stations/halts, that are owned and maintained by his department; and to detail the dates on which the stations/halts were mothballed. (AQW 4699/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The following stations/halts which are owned by Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company and maintained by NIR were 'mothballed' with effect from 29 June 2003.

- Crumlin
- Knockmore (branch platform)
- Ballinderry
- Glenavy

Sewerage Works

Mr McFarland asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the housing growth figures that were used when the new sewage works at Fort Road, Helen's Bay, was constructed; and (ii) the catchment area for this sewage system. (AQW 4714/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the

sewerage installation at Fort Road, Helen's Bay is a pumping station, not a treatment works, which was provided as part of Helen's Bay sewer improvement project completed in 2003. The pumping station transfers flows to Seahill Wastewater Treatment Works and is included in a catchment area covering Helen's Bay and Crawfordsburn.

The Helen's Bay Drainage Area Study completed in 2000 took into account the North Down and Ards Area Plan 1984 to 1995, which was subsequently reviewed in consultation with Planning Service, to assess population density and growth. Potential development at Bridge Road South and Chimera Wood was included in the assessment, which indicated that the population in the area was estimated to grow from 1,380 in 1997 to 2,366 in 2025.

Kinnegar Sewerage Works

Mr McFarland asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the ongoing monitoring his department carries out to ensure that the Kinnegar Sewerage works is meeting the odour emission targets promised in the initial contract. (AQW 4715/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that performance against the odour emission requirements for Kinnegar Wastewater Treatment Works, is measured by monitors that sample the air every 15 minutes. These monitors are positioned around the boundary of the Works and the sample results are used, on a monthly basis, to determine odour emission compliance with the contract.

Failure to meet the odour emission requirements of the contract for any particular month, will result in the contractor incurring financial penalties. In addition, NIW investigates all incidents of non-compliance to ensure they do not constitute further breaches of the contract

Road Lighting

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of miles of the A1, between the border at Newry and the junction at Lisburn Sprucefield, that has lighting; and (ii) the percentage of the overall length of that road that this represents. (AQW 4718/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised that 3.90 miles of the A1, between the border at Newry and the junction at Lisburn Sprucefield, has lighting. This represents 11.87% of the overall length of the road.

Speed Restrictions

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of miles of the A1, between the border at Newry and the junction at Lisburn Sprucefield, that has speed restrictions; and (ii) the percentage of the overall length of that road that this represents. (AQW 4719/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised that the number of miles of the A1, between the border at Newry and the junction at Lisburn Sprucefield, that has speed restrictions and the percentage of the overall length of the road that this represents, are as follows:-

- 23.66 miles with the National Speed Limit (72.01%);
- 7.64 miles with a 60 mph Speed Limit (23.24%);
- 1.13 miles with a 50 mph Speed Limit (3.43%); and
- 0.43 miles with a 40 mph Speed Limit (1.32%).

Park-and-Ride Schemes

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will consider introducing a pilot park-and-ride scheme involving Translink in Newcastle, Co Down, to reduce the number of cars going into the town during the summer months. (AQW 4728/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am aware that Newcastle can become congested during busy holiday periods as motorists search for parking spaces within the town centre. You will be aware that my Department's Roads Service is not the only agency responsible for car parking in the town. In relation to tourist parking, a key role is played by Down District Council. Of the 500 off street car parking spaces within Newcastle some 400 of these are provided by the Council to facilitate the tourist industry.

I should explain that park-and-ride schemes are generally introduced for large cities, where the daily traffic queues caused by congestion are lengthy enough to persuade some travellers to park their car on the periphery of a town or city and make the remaining journey by bus or rail.

To provide new car parking facilities on the periphery of Newcastle would present very many difficulties such as land acquisition, planning permission, environmental considerations and cost. In addition, the success of a park-and-ride site is dependant upon the level of bus priority provided to allow buses to bypass traffic queues. As you will be aware, there is limited opportunity to provide bus priority on the main approaches to Newcastle, particularly on the Dundrum Road.

In the circumstances, there are no plans to introduce a pilot park-and-ride scheme for Newcastle.

Copper Pipes Erosion

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, for each of the last 5 years, (i) the number of complaints that his department has received in relation to the erosion of copper pipes in the South Down constituency; and (ii) how this compares with other constituencies. (AQW 4729/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that complaints are not recorded by Parliamentary constituency and it is not possible to provide the breakdown sought. However, the following details are based on records held by NIW of complaints about corrosion of copper pipes in the major population areas within the South Down constituency and across the North, for the five years to 2007.

Year	South Down Area	Northern Ireland
2003	2	13
2004	3	26
2005	3	23
2006	0	9
2007	0	5

Drumfad Road, Carrowdore

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the action he is taking to address the erosion of the edge of the Drumfad Road, Carrowdore. (AQW 4750/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised that Drumfad Road, Carrowdore is a rural unclassified road. As with many similar roads of this type, throughout the province, verges are overridden when two oncoming vehicles meet and this results in rutting in the verges and muddy conditions on the carriageway. This is particularly prevalent during the winter months.

With the onset of better weather conditions the Ards Section Office will inspect Drumfad Road and arrange for any repairs, deemed necessary, to be carried out.

Illegal Parking

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, since the introduction of the NCP contract, the number of fixed penalty notices that have been issued to drivers parked illegally in disabled parking spaces in (i) the Ards Borough Council area; and (ii) the Down District Council area, broken down by town or village. (AQW 4754/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service advises that the parking enforcement contract with NCP Services Ltd commenced at the end of October 2006. The numbers of Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) issued to vehicles parked illegally in designated disabled person's parking places in Ards Borough Council area and Down District Council area, broken down by town/village, to the end of February 2008 are as follows:-

Ards Borough Council Area (Town/Village)	PCNs Issued (to end Feb 2008)
Newtownards	133
Donaghadee	6
Comber	6
Millisle	1
Total	146

Down District Council Area (Town/Village)	PCNs Issued (to end Feb 2008)
Downpatrick	284
Ballynahinch	62
Newcastle	40
Saintfield	14
Killyleagh	7
Crossgar	6
Castlewellan	4
Total	417

A2 Bangor to Belfast Road

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount of money that has been allocated for the work being carried out on the A2 Bangor to Belfast Road; and to confirm when the work is expected to be complete. (AQW 4759/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the works on the A2 Belfast to Bangor Road, between Palace Barracks and Springhill, are largely to facilitate the installation of an average speed safety camera

system (SPECS Scheme). This work is being carried out by the PSNI and you may wish to contact them to obtain details of the cost of the project.

Roads Service is also currently undertaking a scheme to upgrade traffic signals at the junction with Craigdarraugh Road at an estimated cost of £50k.

Both schemes are due to be completed by the end of March 2008.

Official Visits

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, by date and duration, all visits he has made to each of the 18 constituencies since taking up his post. (AQW 4770/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: For the period 8 May 2007 to 7 March 2008, diary records show that I have made visits to the following constituencies:

Constituency	Date	Approximate Duration
Belfast North	1 June 2007	3 hours 30 minutes
	28 September 2007	2 hour 30 minutes
	26 November 2007	1 hour
Belfast East	23 July 2007	1 hour 30 minutes
	1 August 2007	3 hours
	12 November 2007	1 hour
Belfast South	21 May 2007	1 hour
	31 May 2007	4 hours
	18 July 2007	1 hour
	12 September 2007	2 hours
	11 October 2007	2 hours
	18 October	3 hours
	2 November 2007	1 hour 30 minutes
	7 November 2007	15 minutes
	17 December 2007	30 minutes
Belfast West	10 May 2007	1 hour 15 minutes
	23 July 2007	1 hour 10 minutes
	28 November 2007	30 minutes
	10 January 2008	1 hour 30 minutes
	28 January 2008	1 hour
	4 March 2008	45 minutes
East Antrim	28 November 2007	1 hour 30 minutes
East Londonderry	7 November 2007	2 hours

Constituency	Date	Approximate Duration
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	29 August 2007	1 hour 30 minutes
	14 September 2007	3 hours 30 minutes
	14 November 2007	6 hours 45 minutes
	13 February 2008	1 hour 30 minutes
	5 March 2008	3 hours 45 minutes
Foyle	25 May 2007	1 hour 30 minutes
	15 June 2007	7 hours 15 minutes
	19 September 2007	5 hours 30 minutes
Lagan Valley	None	
Mid Ulster	28 August 2007	2 hours
	30 August 2007	2 hours
Newry & Armagh	17 May 2007	2 hours 30 minutes
	9 July 2007	1 hour
	17 July 2007	4 hours 15 minutes
	26 July 2007	1 hours 30 minutes
	2 August 2007	3 hours
	29 August 2007	2 hours
	7 September 2007	1 hour
	17 September 2007	1 hour 45 minutes
	26 September 2007	2 hours 30 minutes
	6 December 2007	2 hours
	19 December 2007	1 hour 30 minutes
	17 January 2007	2 hours 45 minutes
	27 February 2008	1 hour 30 minutes
North Antrim	30 July 2007	4 hours 15 minutes
	27 February 2008	3 hours
North Down	31 October 2007	1 hour 30 minutes
South Antrim	25 July 2007	1 hour 35 minutes
	23 August	1 hour
	16 January 2008	1 hour 5 minutes
South Down	23 May 2007	1 hour
	26 September 2007	2 hours
	11 October 2007	3 hours 30 minutes
	5 December 2007	1 hour
	19 December 2007	2 hours
	17 January 2008	2 hours 15 minutes
	27 February 2008	1 hour 30 minutes
Strangford	5 July 2007	1 hour
Upper Bann	None	
West Tyrone	29 August 2007	1 hour 30 minutes
	14 September 2007	3 hours 30 minutes
	14 November 2007	6 hours 45 minutes
	13 February 2008	1 hour 30 minutes
	5 March 2008	3 hours 45 minutes

For the purpose of this answer all diary engagements held outside Clarence Court or Stormont estate have been classified as a visit. Where a visit has spanned

two constituencies it has been counted twice as it has not been possible to determine the exact amount of time spent in each constituency.

Larne West Suburbs

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the developments in the Larne West suburbs of Larne, as defined by the area study published in 1992, which have been adopted by his department; (ii) the date on which they were adopted. (AQW 4772/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I should firstly explain that the responsibility for bringing development roads to adoption standards rests with the developer. Since April 2007, the adoption of any new development has been dependant on a two stage process involving adoption of sewers within the development by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) (formerly Water Service) under the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and the adoption of the streets within the development by Roads Service, under the Private Streets Order. Prior to April 2007, Roads Service completed the adoption process as soon as both the development's roads and sewers were properly constructed to the Department's standards.

NIW and Roads Service work closely together to ensure that drainage systems and roads are constructed to the specified standards, before developments are adopted.

With regard to AQW 4772/08, the list of street names (within Larne West) and their adoption dates is as follows:

Street Name	Date of Adoption
Rowan Avenue	20/05/94
Linden Crescent	20/05/94, 30/11/94
Ashgrove	30/11/94
Chestnut Way	30/11/94, 03/06/97
The Beeches, Beech Grove (part)	15/07/05, 22/01/02
The Beeches(part)	12/04/99, 21/01/02
Gordonstown Avenue	09/11/00
Gordonvale Road/Drive	09/11/00, 08/05/02, 20/06/02, 09/11/03, 27/02/04
McGeagh Close	01/08/97
Ogilvie Court	09/12/97
Chism Court	31/12/97

Street Name	Date of Adoption
Manse Field Park/Court	26/07/04
Alexandra Avenue	10/11/98
McFall Court	23/02/99
Graham Road	21/10/03, 27/02/04
Molyneaux Avenue	27/02/04, 09/02/07
Coey Close	21/10/03
Huntly Park	09/02/07
Shanks Park	27/02/04
Sandford Avenue (part)	09/02/07
Porter Crescent(part)	09/02/07

Larne West Suburbs

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the housing developments in the Larne West suburbs of Larne, as defined by the area study published in 1992, which have yet to be adopted by his department; and (ii) the date planning approval was granted for the developments. (AQW 4773/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I should firstly explain that the responsibility for bringing development roads to adoption standards rests with the developer. Since April 2007, the adoption of any new development has been dependant on a two stage process involving adoption of sewers within the development by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) (formerly Water Service) under the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and the adoption of the streets within the development by Roads Service, under the Private Streets Order. Prior to April 2007, Roads Service completed the adoption process as soon as both the development's roads and sewers were properly constructed to the Department's standards.

NIW and Roads Service work closely together to ensure that drainage systems and roads are constructed to the specified standards, before developments are adopted.

The list of street names (within Larne West) granted planning approval but not adopted by Roads Service is as follows:

Development Name	Date of Planning Approval
Walnut development – part distributor road, Walnut Road, Avenue, Park, and Drive	03/05/95

Development Name	Date of Planning Approval
Walnut Park	14/08/97
Walnut Gardens, Green, Grove, and Close	06/11/02
Walnut Gardens, Green, Grove, and Close	04/02/04
Blackthorn development – part distributor road, Blackthorn Hollow	01/07/05
Blackthorn development – part distributor road, Blackthorn Hollow	25/01/05
Lindara development – part distributor road, Lindara	11/05/01
Lindara development – Lindara	03/06/05
Lindara development – Lindara	27/04/05
The Beeches – part distributor road	06/02/06
The Beeches – part distributor road	15/10/02
Oakdene	15/10/02
Oakdene	07/11/03
Oakdene	18/06/07
Oakdene	05/08/01
Development east of The Beeches distributor road	13/05/04
Hampton Manor – part Graham Road, part distributor road, adjoining roads	14/10/96
The Hamptons – part distributor road, adjoining roads	05/01/06
The Hamptons	09/10/07
North of Old Forge Manor and SW of 89 Ballyhampton Road	05/07/07

Traffic Congestion

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the action he is taking to address growing traffic congestion in South Belfast. (AQW 4808/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) proposes a programme of up to 14 Quality Bus Corridors (QBCs) focused on Belfast. In addition to those implemented to date, bus lanes are planned for the Lisburn Road, Malone Road and Saintfield Road corridors in South Belfast. The QBC network will be the backbone of the public transport system within Belfast and will feature improved bus frequencies,

additional bus priority measures, better enforcement of bus lanes and improved access to bus stops. An additional 800 metres of bus lane on the Ormeau Road is planned for implementation by the end of March 2008 and Selective Vehicle Detection, which detects late buses and adjusts the signal timings to assist them, is being provided at all the traffic signals in South Belfast.

However, traffic levels are continuing to grow and the improved bus speeds associated with QBCs will be incremental and may not be fully delivered for some time.

The BMTP also includes proposals to encourage a modal shift from private car to public transport, walking and cycling. Over time, these initiatives are expected to contribute to a reduction in private car travel for journeys to the city centre, at peak times. Additional proposals, including a 700-space Park and Ride facility on the Saintfield Road at Cairnshill, effective car parking controls in the city centre and improvements to walking and cycling facilities are planned for implementation by 2015.

The improvement works to M1/Westlink, which is currently under construction, includes the widening of the roundabout and provision of traffic signals at Stockman's Lane, the provision of underpasses at Broadway Junction and Grosvenor Road Junction, a dedicated bus lane from Broadway Junction to link to the bus lane into the Europa Bus Centre, the widening of the main carriageway between Stockman's Lane and Grosvenor Road to provide three lanes in each direction and a controlled motorway system to control the speed and headway of traffic on the route using overhead gantries and signs. These significant improvements will provide additional capacity and reduce the pressure on associated routes into Belfast from the South.

My Department is also presently considering the case for a rapid transit network for Belfast, including the feasibility of a pilot route serving the Titanic Quarter to the city centre and onwards to Queen's University and the City Hospital.

As well as the above measures, Roads Service implements an ongoing programme of traffic management improvements throughout Belfast and this work will continue. The Roads Service Traffic Information and Control Centre monitors traffic movement at key junctions across Belfast, on an ongoing basis and adjusts signal timings to keep traffic moving as efficiently as possible.

Finally, the developers of the significant housing development on the Saintfield Road corridor will be required to deliver junction improvements at Primrose Hill, Knockbracken Road and Mealough Road to assist with traffic progression.

Roads Service Projects

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, by parliamentary constituency, the amount of funding allocated to the Roads Service for projects in each of the next 3 years. (AQW 4814/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service advises that its overall budget allocations for the 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11 years have yet to be finalised. However, its capital allocation for the next three years is set out under the Investment Strategy as £612 million.

Roads Service does not budget on a parliamentary constituency basis, budget allocations are based on need rather than parliamentary boundary.

Comber Bypass Project

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the action he has taken to address the objections of residents to the completion of the Comber bypass project. (AQW 4815/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised that the current draft Ards and Down Area Plan includes a proposal to provide a link road from the Ballygowan Road to the Comber bypass. This proposed link road is known locally as Phase 3 of the Comber Bypass.

The scheme was the subject of a number of objections at the Area Plan Public Inquiry, which finished in January 2007. The Inspector's report is expected by the end of March 2008 and Roads Service will consider any recommendations contained therein.

I would also point out that, should the scheme proceed further, additional opportunities will be afforded to all people affected to comment through the various statutory processes which may include Environmental Statement, Direction Order, Planning Application and Vesting Order. However, I have to add that the proposed road scheme is not considered a high priority and is not part of the Forward Planning Schedule of schemes being considered for construction within the next ten years.

Roads Service, Strangford

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) in order of priority, the top 20 projects being dealt with by the Roads Service in the Strangford constituency; and (ii) the amount budgeted to be expended on them, in the financial year 2008-09. (AQW 4816/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The role of my Department's Roads Service is to improve, manage and maintain the road network by delivering a programme of work across many different activities.

In spring each year, Roads Service presents an Annual Works Programme each District Council. This includes Capital Works which may vary from Major Highway and Minor Works Schemes to Traffic Management and Street Lighting Improvements.

As you will be aware, Strangford Constituency contains parts of the council districts of Ards, Castlereagh and Down. Roads Service is currently preparing the 2008/09 Annual Works Programme and presentations will be made to each council in the next few months.

In addition, maintenance activities are carried out by way of an annual programme of resurfacing work on many roads & footways and routine maintenance of the network including structures, signs, lines, grass cutting, etc.

Within this large spectrum of activity there are various types of improvement schemes and it is not possible to rank them into a prioritised list of 20 top schemes.

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- A20 Newtownards Frederick Street Link: Scheme to provide 0.3km of single carriageway link road. Construction is estimated to cost £1.2 million.

While some site preparatory work has commenced, work proper on both schemes will begin in April 2008.

In relation to minor improvements, I am advised that schemes for 2010/11 have not yet been identified. The table below contains a list of the indicative schemes for the next two years within the Strangford Constituency. However, I should point out that progress on these schemes will be subject to successful land acquisition and the availability of funding at that time.

	Scheme name	Description of works	Approximate costs
2008/09	U310 Quarter Road, Cloughey.	Footway provision	£100,000
	U126 Old Shore Road, Newtownards.	Footway provision	£80,000

	Scheme name	Description of works	Approximate costs
2008/09	U126 at 88 Bowtown Road, Newtownards.	Provision of improved forward sight distance	£70,000
	Rowreagh Road/Rubane Road, Kircubbin.	Sightline improvement	£60,000
	Enler Park East, Dundonald	Footway reconstruction	45,000
	Wanstead Road, Dundonald	Do	30,000
	Park Drive, Dundonald	Do	10,000
	Saintfield Road	Cycle Route	70,000
	Comber Greenway		150,000
		Total Spend	£615,000
2009/10	A2 Ballyvester Road/ Millisle Road, Donaghadee.	Sightline improvements	£55,000
	C272 Carrickmannon Road/ Bog Road, Ballygowan.	Sightline improvements	£95,000
2009/10	C266 at 60 Ballyrainey Road, Newtownards.	Provision of improved forward sight distance.	£105,000
		Total Spend	£255,000

Pollution Incident

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide details of the pollution incident that occurred at Sixmilewater river, Antrim, on February 25; and to confirm whether departmental officials were responsible for this incident. (AQW 4820/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I understand that at approximately 23.30 on Monday 25 February 2008, the Police alerted my Department's Roads Service to a fuel spillage at the Junction of Dublin Road/Castle Way, Antrim. Roads Service responded promptly and sprayed the roadway between the subject junction and the Ballymena Road with dispersant, in order to make the road safe for traffic. It was not possible for Roads Service to ascertain the amount of fuel spilt onto the road, as the offending vehicle had already departed the scene.

Officials from the Department of the Environment have advised that at 19.10 on Wednesday 27 February 2008 the Environment Heritage Service (EHS) received a report of an oil pollution incident affecting the Sixmilewater river downstream of Clotworthy House in Antrim.

EHS staff inspected the river and surrounding area from the point where the Sixmilewater discharges to Lough Neagh to a point upstream of the bridge on

the Dublin Road. The investigations carried out on both Thursday 28 February and Friday 29 February were inconclusive and whilst a sheen of oil was observed on the river surface, no source of the oil was identified. The river tributaries and the watercourses in grounds around Clotworthy House were checked in order to determine if there was a requirement for the deployment of absorbent booms as a clean-up measure. However, nothing was found where this would have been of benefit.

On Friday 29 February, EHS were advised by Roads Service of the fuel spillage on the evening of Monday 25 February and that this had been dealt with, at the time, following Road Service's incident response procedures.

Unadopted Roads

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 909/08, to detail (i) the roads in South Antrim constituency that are unadopted; and to confirm which of these roads are unadopted due to a developer defaulting on a bond. (AQW 4821/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has compiled the following list of roads in the South Antrim area that remain unadopted and are subject to Private Streets Order Legislation.

- The Oaks, Church Road, Randalstown
- Bramblewood, Ballytromery Road, Crumlin
- Glenoak Grange Close, Nutts Corner Road, Crumlin
- Millmount, Bridge Street, Randalstown
- Old Mill, Dunadry Road, Dunadry
- The Brambles, Craigstown Road, Randalstown
- Spire Way, Moneyglass
- Castle Lodge, Castle Road, Randalstown
- Between Castle Drive and Ashdale, Castle Road, Randalstown
- Edgewood, Moylena Road, Antrim
- St James Meadow, Cidercourt Road, Crumlin
- Millhouse Village, Stiles Way, Antrim
- Greenvale, Belmont Road, Antrim
- Birchdale, Portglenone Road, Randalstown
- The Mews, Cidercourt Road, Crumlin
- Ballytromery Avenue, Ballytromery Road, Crumlin
- Riveroaks, Mill Road, Crumlin
- Carnbeg, Kilbegs Road, Antrim
- Millwater Lodge, Mill Street, Crumlin
- Grangers Mill, Seven Mile Straight, Muckamore

- Junction One, Ballymena Road, Antrim
- Cherrygrove, Belfast Road, Antrim
- Millview, Clonboy Walk, Randalstown
- Castle Avenue, Castle Road, Randalstown
- Bushforde, Steeple Road, Antrim – Phase 1
- Bushforde, Steeple Road, Antrim – Phase 2
- Maple Park, Lurgan Road, Crumlin
- Glencraig Manor, Springfarm Road, Antrim
- The Cedars, Cunningham Way, Antrim
- Bleach Green, Islandreagh Drive, Dunadry
- Main Street, Crumlin
- Dublin Road, Antrim
- Fox Lodge, Dunadry
- Niblock Oaks, Niblock Road, Antrim
- Lamonts Mill, Riverside, Antrim
- Moylena Court, Cunningham Way, Antrim
- Ballymena Road (south dualling), Antrim
- Internal Roads, Junction One, Antrim
- Main Street, Toomebridge
- Bush Road, Antrim
- Main Street, Glenavy
- Glebecoole Park, Carnmoney
- Fernridge, Ballycraig
- Sally Gardens, Ballyclare Road
- Ashford Lodge, Ballyclare Road
- The Beeches, Mallusk
- Huntingdale, Ballyclare
- Lodge Row, Mallusk
- Michelin Road, Mallusk
- Milewater Way, Mossley
- Plantation Avenue, Ballyclare
- Hawthorn Way, Ballyclare
- Green Road, Ballyclare
- Village Green, Ballyclare

Of the above, only one site at Main Street, Glenavy remains unadopted due to the developer defaulting on the road building bond.

In my previous reply to AQW 909/08, the Bramblewood development was listed as the developer having defaulted on the road bond. The circumstances in this case have now changed and the developer is carrying out remedial work on site.

As stated in my previous reply, no road bond was put in place for the Glenoak Grange Close development before the developer went into liquidation.

If the Member requires any further information for a particular development, he should feel free to contact my officials in Roads Service.

Park-and-Ride Schemes

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the locations of all park-and-ride, or park-and-share, facilities in South Antrim constituency. (AQW 4824/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can advise that park-and-ride/share facilities within the South Antrim Constituency, are provided by my Department's Roads Service and by Translink at the following locations:

- Dunsilly Roundabout near Antrim.
- Ballygrooby Roundabout near Randalstown.
- Toome village.
- Templepatrick village.
- Antrim.
- Mossley West.

Comber Bypass

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount expended on the final phase of the Comber bypass to date; and to account for this figure. (AQW 4825/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the current draft Ards and Down Area Plan includes a proposal to provide a link road from the Ballygowan Road to the Comber bypass. This proposed road is known locally as Phase 3 of the Comber bypass and would form the final link.

Comber Bypass

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the contents of the Planning Appeals Commission inspector's report into the final phase of the Comber bypass that he was due to receive at the end of 2007. (AQW 4826/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can advise that the Planning Appeals Commission Inspector's report into the final phase of the Comber by-pass, which was originally due at the end of 2007, is now expected before the end of March 2008. Roads Service will consider any recommendations the inspector makes in relation to Phase 3.

Street Lighting

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to make the street lighting scheme for the Coolestown Walk area of Limavady a priority undertaking in the upcoming financial year, in light of the recent arson attacks in the area. (AQW 4847/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Officials from my Department's Roads Service have confirmed that Phase 2 of the street lighting upgrade for Coolestown Walk, Limavady has been programmed for the 2008/2009 financial year. It is likely that the work will take place during the summer of 2008 and should be fully operational for September 2008.

Newspaper Expenditure

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount his department has spent on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in each of the last three years. (AQW 4848/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The following table sets out the amounts spent by the Department for Regional Development on newspapers, magazines and periodicals in each of the last three years.

Financial Year	Expenditure £
2004/05	28,893
2005/06	30,508
2006/07	28,609

The amounts include expenditure by Roads Service and also Water Service, which in the period up to 31 March 2007, was an Agency of the Department.

Head Cameras

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to introduce head cameras for traffic attendants. (AQW 4853/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service and NCP Services Ltd are considering the possibility of introducing head cameras for Traffic Attendants carrying out parking enforcement duties. When the necessary investigations have been completed, head cameras may be used in a pilot scheme to test the potential benefits of their use.

Light Rail System

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any plans he has to include South Belfast in a proposed light rail system for Belfast. (AQW 4896/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In 2007 my Department commissioned a study to examine the feasibility of a pilot Rapid Transit system for Belfast. This study examined the potential for a number of Rapid Transit routes (both bus based and light rail) including connecting Queens University and Belfast City Hospital to Belfast City centre.

I am currently reviewing the study findings and will be discussing it with the Regional Development Committee and Executive shortly.

Staff Callouts

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps he is taking to reduce the high level of call-outs of his department's staff over the Christmas and New Year period and what steps have been taken to put a new strategy in place. (AQW 4898/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

My Department's Roads Service has call-out arrangements in place to ensure a 24 hours a day, 7 days a week response to roads related emergency incidents. Call-outs, involving Roads Service personnel, who are on standby every night throughout the winter season, are made in response to road conditions. Call outs can be prompted by members of the public, the emergency services, other organisations requiring assistance or as part of our winter service arrangements. The number of call-outs, over any given period, cannot be anticipated.

Roads Service has no plans to put a new strategy in place that would change its existing call-out arrangements.

Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has advised me that it responds to customer calls with regard to water or sewerage incidents in line with its Customer Charter. This is on a 24 hours a day, 7 days a week basis, including public holidays. The level of call-outs over the Christmas/New Year period was broadly in line with other times of the year, taking into account their dependence on the impact of weather conditions, etc.

NIW plans to invest £647 million in its water and wastewater infrastructure by 2011 and £1.4 billion by 2014. This investment aims to improve drinking water quality, safeguard public health, protect the environment and improve services to customers.

NIW envisages that this will reduce key contributors to call-outs relating to problems with water quality, low pressure, unplanned interruptions, incidents of pollution and sewer flooding.

Traffic-Calming Measures

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the reasons for delay in assessing traffic calming measures in Olympia Drive, Belfast. (AQW 4904/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised that the traffic survey on Olympia Drive, originally planned for January 2008, has been delayed due to technical difficulties encountered with the automatic survey equipment on other sites.

These include:-

- vandalism of equipment leading to the need to resurvey;
- erroneous data collected, mostly likely due to parked cars, again resulting in the need to carry out additional surveys; and
- teething problems associated with a new software data analysis package.

I understand that the survey has been re-scheduled to be completed before the end of May 2008.

Neighbourhood Renewal Areas

Mrs McGill asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, in addition to his department's mainstream responsibilities, the resources that have been allocated to (i) Neighbourhood Renewal Areas; and (ii) the Strabane Neighbourhood Renewal Area, in each of the last 2 years. (AQW 4910/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Road Service have advised that no other resources, in addition to its mainstream responsibilities, were allocated to Neighbourhood Renewal Areas (NRAs) in 2006. In 2007/08 it will contribute £30,000 to a scheme in Coalisland NRA and £40,000 to a scheme in O'Kane Park, Omagh.

No resources, in addition to Roads Service's mainstream responsibilities, have been specifically allocated to the Strabane NRA.

Roads Service, Strangford

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) in order of priority, the top

20 projects being dealt with by the Roads Service in the Strangford constituency; and (ii) the amount budgeted to be expended on them, in the financial year 2009-10. (AQW 4916/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The role of my Department's Roads Service is to improve, manage and maintain the road network by delivering a programme of work across many different activities.

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As you will be aware, Strangford Constituency contains parts of the council districts of Ards, Castlereagh and Down. Roads Service is currently preparing the 2008/09 Annual Works Programme and presentations will be made to each council in the next few months.

In addition, maintenance activities are carried out by way of an annual programme of resurfacing work on many roads & footways and routine maintenance of the network including structures, signs, lines, grass cutting, etc.

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Water Connections

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, for each of the last 6 months, (i) the number; and (ii) the cost, of call outs by Northern Ireland Water to the Ballygowan Road, Comber area to repair water connections. (AQW 4918/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that there was a total of eight call outs during the past six months, to repair burst water mains at Ballygowan Road, Comber. The monthly breakdown is as follows:-

Month	Call Outs
September 2007	2
October 2007	1
November 2007	1
December 2007	2
January 2008	1
February 2008	1

Northern Ireland Water has assessed the average cost of each call out to be £500.00.

Car Share Scheme

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of people that have participated in the Travelwise Northern Ireland Car Share Scheme since it was launched in June 2005. (AQW 4932/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised that since its launch in June 2005, there have been 2458 participants in the Travelwise Car Share Scheme, with 1345(55%) of those participants having secured a matching journey.

Complaints Procedure

Mr Cobain asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the extent to which the Roads Service has met its target of (i) responding to all verbal complaints by the end of the next working day; and (ii) issuing substantive replies to 95% of written complaints within 15 working days. (AQW 4933/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised that the 2007/08 performance to 31 December 2007 concerning complaints received is as follows:-

- (i) responded to 95% of all verbal complaints by the end of the next working day; and
- (ii) substantive replies issued to 95% of written complaints within 15 working days.

Park-and-Ride Schemes

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to upgrade park and ride schemes along the Larne to Belfast railway line in the 2008-09 financial year. (AQW 4939/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Plans are in place to upgrade the Whitehead Park and Ride facility by providing an additional 20 spaces. The scheme is scheduled for completion by October 2008.

Other schemes, providing a total of 164 additional places, are planned for Greenisland, Jordanstown and Whiteabbey. It is anticipated that these schemes will be complete by the summer of 2009.

Farmhill Road

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) to detail the extent and nature of works planned for Farmhill Road; (ii) to provide a timescale within which works are scheduled to commence on the culvert replacement scheme at the Cookstown Road end of the Farmhill Road; and (iii) if the Roads Service is committed to providing a footpath along the entire stretch of Farmhill Road. (AQW 4941/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has plans to realign a 200 metre length of the Farmhill Road in the vicinity of its junction with the Ballynamullan Road. The work will include the replacement of Ballynamullan Bridge, which is narrow and of poor alignment, and the provision of visibility sight splays at the Farmhill Road / Ballynamullan Road junction. Consultation with the relevant landowners is ongoing.

There are also plans to replace a culvert adjacent to house number 17 at the Cookstown Road end of Farmhill Road, and provide a short 20 metre length of link footway. Design work for the culvert replacement is nearing completion and it is anticipated that a work instruction will be issued to the contractor in the next 4 to 6 weeks.

Roads Service has no plans to provide a footway along the full length of Farmhill Road.

Disability Access

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans to provide disability access between platforms at train stations, including Lisburn. (AQW 4942/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink, in consultation with Disability Action, is undertaking a programme of works to improve access at its railway halts and stations at a total cost of £10.9 million. These works, which are expected to be completed in August this year, aim to make the main railway stations fully accessible and to improve access to all railway halts.

Regarding Lisburn Station, lifts are being installed to enable access to all platforms, and are scheduled to be operational by May 2008.

Parking Regulations

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm if he plans to implement new parking regulations similar to those implemented in England under the Traffic Management Act 2004. (AQW 4949/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Traffic Management (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 (the 2005 Order) introduced arrangements for civil enforcement of certain traffic offences in the North. Some of the new powers in The Traffic Management Act 2004 are already included in the 2005 Order. I have no plans, at present, to amend the 2005 Order.

External Consultancy

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his department's policy in relation to external consultancy. (AQW 4950/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The use of external consultants by Government Departments here in the North, including my Department, is governed by DAO (DFP) 03/05, which sets out the

operational parameters within which external consultancy services are procured and managed.

DRD supplemented this DAO with a detailed guidance manual, which sets out specific requirements and procedures relating to the procurement and use of consultants in my Department.

In addition, the procurement of consultancy services is subject to the same general principles that apply to any other area of public expenditure i.e. regularity, propriety and value for money.

Donemana Waste Water Treatment Works

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the current capacity of Donemana Wastewater Treatment Works. (AQW 4958/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it is currently undertaking a comprehensive exercise to assess the treatment capability of 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.

The Chief Executive of NIW will write to you when the full assessment of Donemana Wastewater Treatment Works is complete.

Donemana Waste Water Treatment Works

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to upgrade the wastewater treatment works at (i) Donemana; and (ii) Douglas Bridge. (AQW 4959/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it is currently undertaking a comprehensive exercise to assess the treatment capability of 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. The results of this exercise will determine whether or not Donemana Wastewater Treatment Works will need to be upgraded to cater for future development in the area. The Chief Executive of NIW will write to you when the full assessment of the Works is complete.

NIW plans to upgrade Douglas Bridge Wastewater Treatment Works, in conjunction with Victoria Bridge Wastewater Treatment Works, at a cost of £2 million. However, due to competing priorities,

work is not scheduled to commence until 2011/12 subject to funding being available following the regulatory periodic review in 2009. The work will take approximately one year to complete.

Rail Passengers

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of passengers travelling by rail on (i) the Belfast to Derry/Londonderry line; (ii) the Larne line; (iii) the Bangor line; (iv) the Portadown line and (v) the cross-border line, in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 4970/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The following table provides Northern Ireland Railways passenger journey numbers on (i) the Belfast to Derry line; (ii) the Larne line; (iii) the Bangor line; (iv) the Portadown line and (v) the cross-border line, in each of the last 10 years. For completeness, the passenger journey information is also provided for the Portrush line.

	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03
Derry	560,997	561,411	582,643	631,029	454,468
Larne	1,467,440	1,473,570	1,636,591	1,769,808	1,794,757
Bangor	1,454,722	1,378,236	1,335,489	1,316,928	1,571,457
Portadown	1,258,926	1,370,513	1,579,785	1,698,199	1,769,503
Portrush	223,372	209,145	280,831	345,190	276,195
Cross Border	846,997	934,423	976,658	953,122	1,164,676

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08 Forecast
Derry	652,262	850,056	874,954	1,020,685	1,160,944
Larne	1,811,187	1,827,617	1,477,979	1,720,190	1,904,798
Bangor	1,544,386	1,517,315	1,860,752	1,956,801	2,050,351
Portadown	1,855,165	1,940,826	2,171,165	2,505,059	3,006,324
Portrush	370,939	465,682	508,486	518,160	466,000
Cross Border	1,000,830	836,983	819,630	809,157	899,162

In 2004/05 the method of counting passenger journeys changed. The 2000/01 to 2002/03 journeys are original estimates revised to be comparable with the new method. Figures prior to this have not been revised.

In 2003/04 there were problems with the Translink ticketing system. Consequently the 2003/04 figure is a mid point estimate of the years 2002/03 and 2004/05.

Culmore Waste Water Treatment Works

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the current level of raw sewage passing through the Culmore Wastewater Treatment Works each day; (ii) the projections that have been made of future increases in daily flows through the works; and (iii) how these projections compare with the current capacity of the works.

(AQW 4977/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it is currently undertaking a comprehensive exercise to assess the treatment capability of 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.

Early indications are that Culmore Wastewater Treatment Works is currently operating at approximately 80% of capacity and could further accommodate approximately 6,800 properties. However, this initial assessment will need to be confirmed as part of the review. The Chief Executive of NIW will write to you when the full assessment of the Works is complete.

Traffic Survey

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the purpose of the traffic survey currently being carried out on the A8; and (ii) the methodology being used. (AQW 4979/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service advise that the purpose of the traffic survey being carried out is to establish existing traffic movement along the A8 corridor and inform the traffic model used to predict further levels. This information is used to advise on the economic appraisal of route options.

The methodology being used includes:-

- road side interviews - these select a sample of vehicles and ask specific questions to ascertain details such as origin/destination and purpose of trip;
- automatic traffic counters - which record the volume of traffic using the route;
- classified junction turning counts - which ascertain the movement of vehicles at junctions;
- journey time surveys; and
- pedestrian and cyclist usage surveys along the route.

Roundabout Scheme

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the potential schemes that the proposed A23 Moneyreagh Road/B178 Hillsborough Road 4 leg roundabout was compared against; and (ii) the criteria used when deciding it did not compare favourably to those schemes. (AQW 4989/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: When considering any potential Minor Works Improvement scheme, my Department's Roads Service carries out an assessment to prioritise schemes according to need and value for money, ensuring the best use of limited resources.

The assessment process takes account of a number of factors, including the recorded injury collision history, volumes of traffic using the route and value for money. Implementation of any scheme is then subject to the availability of the necessary land and finance.

Examples of schemes which are included in Eastern Division's programme for the 2008-09 financial year are:-

- a signalised junction at Wilmar Road/McKinstry Road, Lisburn;
- slip lane extension at A49 Ballynahinch Road/Saintfield Road;
- provision of new footway at Ballyeaston Road and Lower Ballyboley Road, Ballyeaston; and
- bridge widening and new footway at Park Road, Newtownabbey.

Schemes provisionally programmed for the 2009-10 financial year include a junction improvement on the B170 at Craigantlet Crossroads.

In the case of the A23 Moneyreagh Road scheme, the cost of the land required is significantly higher than had been included in previous estimates. This means that the scheme would not rank highly compared to other potential Minor Works schemes within Eastern Division.

A major road improvement scheme at this location could also have implications for the development potential of adjoining land. In view of these and the increase in the estimated cost of the scheme, Roads Service considers that it would be prudent to await the findings of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan before deciding on whether to commit to funding a possible scheme at this location.

Official Visits

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the protocols he follows

in informing MLAs that he will be visiting their respective constituencies. (AQW 4993/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Private Office notifies MLAs in the respective constituency, via e-mail, at least 24 hours in advance of a visit.

This is in line with current guidance which issued on 12 February 2008 from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Public Appointments

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of public appointments that have been made by his department since the restoration of devolution; and (ii) the number that were (a) female; and (b) elected councillors. (AQW 5021/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Since the restoration of devolution my Department has made 24 public appointments, including 15 reappointments. Of these appointments three were female and eight were councillors (including one female).

Unadopted Housing

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any assessment made in relation to the need to update the Private Streets Order (Northern Ireland 1980) in order to address the growing problems associated with unadopted housing estates. (AQW 5029/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am pleased to advise that officials from my Department's Roads Service have established a team to determine whether the Private Streets Order remains fit for purpose. The team will consider a wide range of issues which may require revisions to the order. They intend to conclude this phase of their work with the next 3 months.

Unadopted Housing in South Antrim

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Regional Development what action will be taken to address the serious problems associated with the backlog of unadopted private housing estates in the South Antrim area. (AQW 5030/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised that the responsibility for bringing new development roads to adoption standards rests with developers. To secure the provision of a road layout

to the Department's standards, development sites are normally covered by a Bond under the Private Streets (NI) Order 1980.

The purpose of this bond is to ensure that the developer constructs the roads and sewers to the required standard as detailed on the Private Streets determination plan, approved at planning approval stage. If the developer defaults Roads Service can take enforcement action under the Private Streets (NI) Order 1980 and use this bond money to make good the roads and sewers. However, before this action is taken, Roads Service, in conjunction with Northern Ireland Water, will attempt to work with developers to resolve any problems. If that approach fails then the Department will move to enforcement action under the Private Streets (NI) Order 1980.

Roads Service has an ongoing commitment to tackle the problem of unadopted housing development estate roads. These backlog Private Streets Developments in the South Antrim area have been listed and brought forward on an 'individual site' basis to effectively tackle specific problems.

Parking Bays

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4054/08, to confirm if he will consider increasing the financial penalty for motorists who park in a disabled parking bay. (AQW 5071/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised that the current amount of a Penalty Charge Notice (PCN) issued to a vehicle parked in a disabled persons parking space, without displaying a valid badge, is £60. I consider this to be a reasonable charge which provides a sufficient deterrent in relation to the contravention.

Roads Service, through its parking enforcement contract with NCP Services Ltd, will continue to provide enforcement against this contravention, as a priority.

Road Improvements

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the spend on road safety and road improvement in each of the Belfast electoral areas over each of the last three years. (AQW 5085/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service does not hold detail of spend, relating to road safety and road improvement, at electoral area level.

However, it can provide relevant information at Council area level. The total level of spend on road safety and road improvement in the Belfast City Council area in 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07 is summarised in the table below:

	Expenditure (£k)		
	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Total	4,620	4,281	24,106

Free Travel

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a definitive date for the introduction of free travel for people aged 60 and over. (AQW 5111/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am planning that the first journeys under the proposed scheme will be made in October 2008. Until final consultation on the policy and the Equality Impact Assessment has been completed, I am unable to set a firm date.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Housing Executive Land

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm whether the proceeds of any future sale of Northern Ireland Housing Executive land will be reinvested in the district in which the land was located. (AQW 4591/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The proceeds of any sales are treated as capital receipts and the extent to which these can be retained is subject to budget allocation by the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Neighbourhood Renewal Areas

Mrs McGill asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, in addition to her department's mainstream responsibilities, the resources that have been allocated to (i) Neighbourhood Renewal Areas; and (ii) the Strabane Neighbourhood Renewal Area, in each of the last 2 years. (AQW 4700/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information below provides details of the specific allocations to Neighbourhood Renewal areas generally and specifically to the Strabane

Neighbourhood Renewal area for the years in question. Other departmental resources are available to Neighbourhood Renewal areas however information on amounts spent in these areas is not collected.

RESOURCES ALLOCATED TO THE 36 NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL AREAS

	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Neighbourhood Renewal allocation	£20,861,000	£23,457,000
Integrated Development Fund	£10,000	£4,000,000
Public Realm	£4,357,000	£3,507,000
Urban Development Grant	£2,416,000	£2,547,000

RESOURCES ALLOCATED TO STRABANE NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL AREA

	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Neighbourhood Renewal allocation	£347,361	£323,162
Integrated Development Fund	£390,628	£316,000
Public Realm	£116,359	£271,290
Urban Development Grant	£0	£38,000

Houses of Non-Occupation

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development if an assessment has been carried in relation to public housing being used as 'giro drop' houses (houses of non-occupation); and to detail the findings of this assessment. (AQW 4720/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In January 2008, the Housing Executive initiated a programme of visits to some 18,000 public-sector properties in areas where the risk of non-occupation is deemed to be the highest. These properties will be checked to verify that they are occupied by the legitimate tenants.

By the end of February just over 11,500 Executive properties had been checked. Nine have been recovered after being found unoccupied and 13 Housing Benefit claims have been terminated as a result.

Anti-Social Behaviour Orders

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs), or acceptable behaviour contracts, issued by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 4760/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Anti Social Behaviour Orders were introduced into Northern Ireland in 2004. The number of Anti Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) and Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs) are detailed below.

	2005	2006	2007	Jan/Feb. 2008
ASBOs	1	1	0	0
ABCs	6	18	23	4

Official Visits

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by date and duration, all visits she has made to each of the 18 constituencies since taking up her post. (AQW 4769/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have set out in the table below the dates of my visits in each of the parliamentary constituencies in Northern Ireland from 08 May 2007 to 10 March inclusive. Information on the duration of each visit is not held. Some visits involved more than one venue visited in the constituency on the date provided.

Constituency	Dates
Belfast East	3, 10 September 2007 22 October 2007 14 November 2007
Belfast North	3 July 2007 6, 8 August 2007 12, 17 September 2007 16 October 2007 1 November 2007 7, 19 December 2007 22, 23, 30 January 2008
Belfast South	4, 11, 18, 20, 21 June 2007 13 August 2007 6 September 2007 12 February 2008 4, 5 March 2008
Belfast West	6, 20, 21 June 2007 19 July 2007 8 August 2007 3 October 2007 19 December 2007 6 February 2008 6 March 2008

Constituency	Dates
East Antrim	15 August 2007 5 December 2007 30 January 2008
East Londonderry	17 October 2007
Fermanagh/South Tyrone	23 August 2007 20 September 2007 3, 26 October 2007 14 December 2007
Foyle	29 August 2007 19 October 2007 6, 13 December 2007 20 February 2008
Lagan Valley	8, 13 August 2007 17 December 2007
Mid Ulster	4 October 2007
Newry & Armagh	6 June 2007 30 August 2007 5, 19 September 2007 29 November 2007 20 December 2007 18 January 2008 6, 7 March 2008
Newry & Armagh	6 June 2007 30 August 2007 5, 19 September 2007 29 November 2007 20 December 2007 18 January 2008 6, 7 March 2008
North Antrim	9 July 2007 21 August 2007 12, 26 September 2007
North Down	19 September 2007
South Antrim	26 September 2007 21 November 2007 12 December 2007
South Down	15, 20 June 2007 30 August 2007 28 September 2007 19 October 2007 16, 30 November 2007 17 January 2008 8 February 2008

Constituency	Dates
Strangford	21 November 2007 5 December 2007 10 March 2008
Upper Bann	28 August 2007 29 November 2007 6, 7 March 2008
West Tyrone	13 June 2007 14 December 2007 23 January 2008

Housing Executive Properties

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, for each of the last 5 years, the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties that have been allocated to foreign nationals, broken down by district office. (AQW 4771/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This information is not available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 3574/08, to detail the reasons for the large variation in the average length of time taken between application and instruction to install under the Warm Homes Scheme, for each district council area. (AQW 4780/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Warm Homes Scheme is oversubscribed and variations are primarily due to the popularity of the Scheme. The number of referrals received for each area varies and applications for only insulation measures are completed more quickly than those for both heating and insulation for reasons of cost and the complex nature of the work involved.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 3545/08, to detail the reasons for the large variation in the numbers of outstanding applications for heating between each of the 5 areas indicated. (AQW 4781/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of applications for assistance from the Warm Homes Scheme can vary from area to area which

means the number of outstanding applications will inevitably be different. The cost of carrying out an oil upgrade or repair has also risen considerably in recent times. The costs of converting to gas heating is cheaper, however, many applicants are reluctant to convert to gas where available, preferring to wait considerably longer for an oil repair or upgrade.

Private Sector Grant Scheme

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans for a £40m private sector grant scheme to promote sustainability. (AQW 4792/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The funding which I announced is for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Private Sector Grants Scheme which covers a broad range of assistance.

Grant aid performs three main functions.

1. It helps vulnerable people, particularly elderly people and people on very low incomes, to live comfortably and safely in their own homes.
2. It supports a wide range of housing strategies including the Rural Housing strategy, urban regeneration, housing and health and the empty homes strategy.
3. It offers a very cost effective way of providing affordable housing both for first time buyers and private tenants.

Grant aid therefore makes an important contribution to sustainability within the housing stock. Most importantly, it helps low income and more vulnerable households improve their existing housing to a good standard.

Code for Sustainable Homes

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her department's plans has to adopt the UK Government's 'Code for Sustainable Homes' as the future template for the building of social housing. (AQW 4793/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I refer to the answer that I gave to Mr Willie Clarke in response to AQW 32238/08.

All social new build self-contained homes are already required, as a condition of Housing Association Grant funding, to achieve the Eco Homes very good standard which is broadly equivalent to the three star rating of the "Code for Sustainable Homes" standard.

From 1 April 2008 it will be made mandatory for all new build self-contained social housing schemes to achieve the Code for Sustainable Homes minimum three star rating.

Newspaper Expenditure

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her department's expenditure on (i) newspapers; (ii) magazines; and (iii) periodicals, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4798/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The money spent by the Department for Social Development in the last three years is detailed in the table below.

Department for Social Development	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Expenditure	£22,432.69	£19,118.65	£23,138.60

The financial information requested is not recorded within the Department in the categories stipulated; therefore, the figures quoted include payments in respect of books, newspapers and library journals.

Home Improvement Grants

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, for each of the last 3 years, the number of applicants for Northern Ireland Housing Executive Home Improvement Grants, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 4809/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is not readily available in the format requested. However, the following table details, for each of the last 3 years, the number of preliminary enquiry forms received for Home Improvement Grants, broken down by District Council area:

District Council	2004/ 2005	2005/ 2006	2006/ 2007	Totals
Antrim	165	147	158	470
Ards	406	331	240	977
Armagh	386	423	441	1,250
Ballymena	208	165	191	564
Ballymoney	119	88	129	336
Banbridge	210	196	243	649
Belfast	2,345	2,201	1,951	6,497
Carrickfergus	191	171	223	585
Castlereagh	371	278	262	911
Coleraine	343	256	203	802

District Council	2004/ 2005	2005/ 2006	2006/ 2007	Totals
Cookstown	393	326	448	1,167
Craigavon	567	581	561	1,709
Derry	796	801	785	2,382
Down	415	380	508	1,303
Dungannon	597	512	486	1,595
Fermanagh	759	684	913	2,356
Larne	207	233	201	641
Limavady	189	199	199	587
Lisburn	460	475	546	1,481
Magherafelt	241	260	272	773
Moyle	96	46	76	218
Newry and Mourne	877	1,124	1,229	3,230
Newtownabbey	470	400	444	1,314
North Down	325	269	253	847
Omagh	481	398	401	1,280
Strabane	440	417	432	1,289
Total	12,057	11,361	11,795	35,213

* the submission of a Preliminary Enquiry form represents an initial expression of interest in the Home Improvement Grant scheme. Not all Preliminary Enquiries however result in formal applications for grant aid.

Private Tenancies Order

Mr Cobain asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of private landlords against whom enforcement action has been taken under The Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, broken down by district council area.

(AQW 4818/08)

The Minister for Social Development: District Councils are very proactive in carrying out their responsibilities under the Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and in many cases are working to resolve issues without the need for enforcement action. I am unable to provide the information on the number of landlords; however, the table below details the number of cases where enforcement action against landlords has been taken, broken down by district council area.

Council	No of Cases
Ards	1
Ballymoney	2
Banbridge	13

Council	No of Cases
Belfast	42
Carrick	14
Castlereagh	5
Craigavon	3
Down	1
Dungannon	1
Newtownabbey	3

Housing Benefit Claimants

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of housing benefit claimants in the South Antrim constituency, who receive partial payment towards their privately rented accommodation fees because their rented accommodation is larger than the recipient is entitled to claim under existing housing benefit eligibility criteria.

(AQW 4822/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is not available. The Housing Executive does not specifically record information on Housing Benefit claims in relation to size of accommodation.

Housing Benefit Claimants

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of housing benefit claimants who reside in South Antrim constituency.

(AQW 4823/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The total number of Housing Benefit claimants in the South Antrim constituency is 7549.

These include tenants in:

NIHE Properties	4785
Housing Association properties	568
Private rented properties	2196

The South Antrim Constituency includes Housing Executive Districts Newtownabbey 1 and 2 and Antrim.

Replacement Grants

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what consideration she will give to increasing the amount of the replacement grant, given

the impact of rising building costs and inflation.
(AQW 4864/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Renovation Grant is the normal grant for dealing with unfitness. It is only where it is economically or technically advantageous to replace a property that a Replacement Grant is offered. An increase in the level of grant aid is not considered appropriate. Indeed there may be a case for bringing the grant to the same level as the maximum Renovation Grant so that there is no incentive in grant terms for an applicant to pursue replacement over renovation.

Hostel Accommodation

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of applicants for public housing in the Ards council area that were offered hostel accommodation, due to appropriate housing not being available, in 2005-2006; 2006-2007; and 2007-2008.
(AQW 4867/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Temporary accommodation is provided to homeless households under the duties set out in the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1988. Where someone presents as homeless, and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has reason to believe that is the case, he or she is placed in temporary accommodation. This service is provided to households while their homelessness assessment is undertaken and to households who are accepted as statutory homeless and awarded Full Duty Homeless Status pending permanent re housing. The number of households presenting as homeless to the Housing Executive's Newtownards District Office and requiring temporary accommodation for each of the last three years is as follows:

Year	2005/ 2006	2006/ 2007	2007/2008 (to Feb)
Housing Executive hostel placements	27	19	15
Voluntary Sector hostel placements	17	13	18
Private Sector temporary accommodation placements	32	27	12
Totals	76	59	45

Housing Benefit

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development, in the light of the large increases in the cost of private rental accommodation, to outline her plans to

increase the amount of housing benefit that can be offered by the Housing Executive.
(AQW 4868/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive does take account of the cost of private rental accommodation when calculating a private sector claimant's entitlement to Housing Benefit. In addition, the amount of the claimants weekly income, the number and circumstances of other people residing with the claimant and any special circumstances that may exist are taken into consideration,

Beyond the annual benefit up-rating which takes place in April each year and applies to both the social and private rented sector I have no plans to increase the amount of Housing Benefit payable.

I consider that the future of housing provision within Northern Ireland is best served by the social and private sectors working together to promote more opportunity and choice for tenants.

Registered Carers

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of registered carers who are over 60 years of age.
(AQW 4871/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is not available as my Department does not hold a list of registered carers.

Registered Properties

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of (i) Housing Association properties; (ii) Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties; and (iii) privately owned properties, in (a) Ballymoney; (b) Dunloy; (c) Rasharkin; and (d) Stranocum.
(AQW 4882/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The social housing stock at 31 March 2007 was as follows:

	Bally- money Town	Dunloy	Ras- harkin	Stran- ocum
Housing Executive	721	79	138	28
Housing Associations	158	0	2	0

Information on private sector stock is not available in the form requested. Rates Collection Agency figures show that there are 7086 privately owned dwellings in the Moyle District Council area

Registered Properties

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of (i) Housing Association properties; (ii) Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties; and (iii) privately owned properties, in the Ballymena area. (AQW 4883/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The table below details the social housing stock and the number of privately owned dwellings in the Ballymena Borough Council area, at 31 March 2007.

Housing Associations	554
Northern Ireland Housing Executive	2,898
Private Sector *	21,925

* These figures are sourced from Rates Collection Agency data.

Fuel Poverty

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the steps she is taking to ensure that measurements in relation to the level of fuel poverty takes into account the increased cost of fuel prices for home heating oil. (AQW 4900/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Three factors are taken into account in the measurement of fuel poverty: income, fuel prices and house conditions. While Government can influence house conditions and, to a certain extent, incomes, fuel prices are wholly beyond its control and are determined by world markets.

Planning System

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the discussions she has had with the Minister of the Environment in relation to the review of the planning system. (AQW 4920/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have not had discussions with the Minister of the Environment in relation to the review of the planning system.

Socially Deprived Areas

Mr Cobain asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the consultation she has had with the Minister for Regional Development to reduce the physical isolation of people within socially deprived areas, in relation to access to employment opportunities. (AQW 4922/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Access to employment opportunity is the responsibility of the

Minister for Employment and Learning. I have not undertaken any specific consultation with the Minister for Regional Development on this issue.

Anti-Social Behaviour Orders

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs), or acceptable behaviour contracts, issued by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, in each of the last three years. (AQW 4927/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of ASBOs issued by the courts on foot of applications from the Housing Executive, and acceptable behaviour contracts (ABCs) agreed with the Housing Executive, during the last three years are detailed below.

	2005	2006	2007	Jan/Feb. 2008
ASBOs	1	1	0	0
ABCs	6	18	23	4

Child Support Agency

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the average number of days absent for female Administrative Assistants and Administrative Officers in the Child Support Agency in each of the last five years. (AQO 2528/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Details of the information requested are contained in the table below;

AVERAGE NUMBER OF DAYS ABSENT FOR FEMALE AO'S AND AA'S IN THE CHILD SUPPORT AGENCY

Grade	Year				
	02 - 03	03 - 04	04 - 05	05 - 06	06 - 07
Administrative Officers	28.2	32.9	32.0	28.3	29.4
Administrative Assistants	11.0	10.9	19.0	14.0	18.1

Community Development Work

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Social Development to list the groups, arms-length bodies and limited companies which received funding from her department for community development work from May 2007. (AQW 4943/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department supports community development through our range of housing, regeneration, neighbourhood renewal, voluntary sector and community development programmes, which target disadvantaged communities and vulnerable groups. The information requested by Mr Craig, for a list of organisations which have received funding since 1 May 2007, has been prepared. A copy of this list has been placed in the Library.

Economy 7 Heating

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive tenants using Economy 7 heating in the North Antrim constituency, broken down by District Office Area. (AQW 4945/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This information is not readily available in the format requested as the Housing Executive's district office boundaries do not precisely coincide with the constituency boundary. However the number of tenants using Economy 7 heating in each Housing Executive district office area is as follows:

Ballymoney district office	94
Moyle district office	21
Ballymena district office	609

Neighbourhood Renewal in the Loughview Estate

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans for neighbourhood renewal in the Loughview Estate, Holywood, over the next 3 years. (AQW 4952/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Neighbourhood Renewal programme is targeted at the 10% most deprived urban areas in Northern Ireland. There are 36 Neighbourhood Renewal areas and 17 smaller deprived areas at Enumeration District level which benefit from funding. None of the areas listed in the question is targeted for support from the Neighbourhood Renewal programme because they are not located in the 10% most deprived areas. They are therefore not included in my Department's Neighbourhood Renewal expenditure plans for the next three years.

Neighbourhood Renewal in the Breezemount Area

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans for neighbourhood renewal in the Breezemount Estate, Bangor, in each of the next 3 years. (AQW 4953/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Neighbourhood Renewal programme is targeted at the 10% most deprived urban areas in Northern Ireland. There are 36 Neighbourhood Renewal areas and 17 smaller deprived areas at Enumeration District level which benefit from funding. None of the areas listed in the question is targeted for support from the Neighbourhood Renewal programme because they are not located in the 10% most deprived areas. They are therefore not included in my Department's Neighbourhood Renewal expenditure plans for the next three years.

Neighbourhood Renewal in Conlig Village

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans for neighbourhood renewal in Conlig Village, in each of the next 3 years. (AQW 4954/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Neighbourhood Renewal programme is targeted at the 10% most deprived urban areas in Northern Ireland. There are 36 Neighbourhood Renewal areas and 17 smaller deprived areas at Enumeration District level which benefit from funding. None of the areas listed in the question is targeted for support from the Neighbourhood Renewal programme because they are not located in the 10% most deprived areas. They are therefore not included in my Department's Neighbourhood Renewal expenditure plans for the next three years.

Neighbourhood Renewal in the Beechfield Estate

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans for neighbourhood renewal in the Beechfield Estate, Donaghadee, in each of the next 3 years. (AQW 4955/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Neighbourhood Renewal programme is targeted at the 10% most deprived urban areas in Northern Ireland. There are 36 Neighbourhood Renewal areas and 17 smaller deprived areas at Enumeration District level which benefit from funding. None of the areas listed in the question is targeted for support from the Neighbourhood Renewal programme because

they are not located in the 10% most deprived areas. They are therefore not included in my Department's Neighbourhood Renewal expenditure plans for the next three years.

Neighbourhood Renewal in Millisle Village

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans for neighbourhood renewal in Millisle Village, Holywood, in each of the next 3 years. (AQW 4956/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Neighbourhood Renewal programme is targeted at the 10% most deprived urban areas in Northern Ireland. There are 36 Neighbourhood Renewal areas and 17 smaller deprived areas at Enumeration District level which benefit from funding. None of the areas listed in the question is targeted for support from the Neighbourhood Renewal programme because they are not located in the 10% most deprived areas. They are therefore not included in my Department's Neighbourhood Renewal expenditure plans for the next three years.

Registered Properties

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of (i) Housing Association properties; (ii) Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties; and (iii) privately owned properties, in (a) Cushendall; (b) Waterfoot; (iii) Cushendun; (iv) Armoy; (v) Ballycastle; (vi) Ballintoy; (vii) Carey; and (viii) Bushmills. (AQW 4984/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information on the social stock as at 31 March 2007 is as follows:

Town	Housing Association Properties	Housing Executive Properties
Cushendall	27	50
Waterfoot	0	13
Cushendun	0	26
Armoy	6	80
Ballycastle Town	111	303
Ballintoy	2	17
Ballyvoy*	0	14
Bushmills	17	242

Information on the private sector is not available by townland but Rate Collection Agency data shows that there are 7002 private properties in the Moyle District Council Area.

* Information on Carey is not available.

Official Visits

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the protocols she follows in informing MLAs that she will be visiting their respective constituencies. (AQW 4991/08)

The Minister for Social Development: A common protocol for informing MLAs of visits by Ministers to their constituencies was introduced in February. My Private Office follows that protocol which provides that MLAs should normally be informed of any Ministerial visit not less than 24 hours in advance.

Neighbourhood Renewal in the Clandeboyne Area

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans for neighbourhood renewal in the Clandeboyne area, Bangor, over the next 3 years. (AQW 5005/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Neighbourhood Renewal programme is targeted at the 10% most deprived urban areas in Northern Ireland. There are 36 Neighbourhood Renewal areas and 17 smaller deprived areas at Enumeration District level which benefit from funding. Clandeboyne is not targeted for support from the Neighbourhood Renewal programme because it is not located in the 10% most deprived areas. It is therefore not included in my Department's Neighbourhood Renewal expenditure plans for the next three years.

Public Appointments

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number public appointments that have been made by her department since the restoration of devolution; and (ii) the number that were (a) female; and (b) elected councillors. (AQW 5017/08)

The Minister for Social Development: From 8 May 2007 to 12 March 2008 my department made 13 public appointments, 12 of which were re-appointments. Of these, three were female and four were elected councillors. The councillors elected were statutory nominations from the Housing Council to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive Board.

Trip to the Somme

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Social Development to give her assessment of the Antrim Housing Executive's funding of a £15,000 trip to the

Somme in May 2008, given that Antrim Borough Council already organises an annual July trip to the Somme. (AQW 5031/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I understand that the Housing Executive has not provided funding to Antrim Borough Council for a trip to the Somme. It did however contribute £15,500, at the request of the Council, to support a bonfire management pilot project proposed by Antrim Borough Council Bonfire Sub-Committee.

Visit to Ballybeen

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail when and how she informed the East Belfast Partnership of her visit to Ballybeen on Monday 10 March 2008. (AQW 5087/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department did not inform the East Belfast Partnership of my visit to Ballybeen on Monday 10 March 2008. It was not considered necessary as my visit was linked to an earlier request from the secretary of Ballybeen Improvement Group to meet to discuss funding for the Enler project. The bodies directly involved in the Enler project, namely Landmark East and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, were informed of my joint visit with DHSSPS and IFI.

Visit to Ballybeen

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail when and how she informed Landmark East of her visit to Ballybeen on Monday 10 March 2008. (AQW 5088/08)

The Minister for Social Development: An official from my Department tried unsuccessfully to contact the Chief Executive of Land Mark East by phone on Wednesday 5th & Thursday 6th March 2008. Contact was made with the Chief Executive on the morning of Friday 7th March, when one of my officials confirmed the details of my visit to Ballybeen on Monday 10th March 2008. An e-mail later that afternoon detailed the timetable for the visit.

Visit to Ballybeen

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail when and how she informed the Northern Ireland Housing Executive of her visit to Ballybeen on Monday 10 March 2008. (AQW 5089/08)

The Minister for Social Development: An official from my Department telephoned an official from

NIHE, on Wednesday 5 March 2008 to advise him of my proposed visit to Ballybeen along with DHSSPS and IFI on Monday 10 March 2008 to announce funding of the Enler Project.

Transfer of Housing Executive Jobs

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the savings that will be made from the proposed transfer of jobs from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive Enniskillen branch to Omagh; and to give her assessment of the cost effectiveness of this decision and any savings that will be made. (AQW 5090/08)

The Minister for Social Development: A review of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's services and structures was undertaken under its Modernising Services Programme. This programme was subject to a rigorous Equality Impact Assessment, and a detailed Business Case was produced which demonstrated improved value for money through the transfer of administrative functions associated with Housing Benefit and Accounts from the 35 District Offices to 6 Area Centres. This change will deliver efficiencies particularly in relation to management overheads without diminution in service.

Key services including housing, homelessness, estate management, maintenance and local community development will be retained in the district offices.

Housing Executive Offices in Enniskillen

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm (i) if it is the long term aim of her department to close the Northern Ireland Housing Executive offices in Enniskillen; and (ii) if the decision will be 'rural proofed'; and to detail the impact this will have on client services (AQW 5093/08)

The Minister for Social Development: There is no long term plan to close the Housing Executive Offices in Enniskillen.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Postage Envelopes

Miss McIlveen asked the Assembly Commission if any consideration has been given to issuing pre-paid second class postage envelopes for use by Members. (AQW 4370/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): In October 1998, immediately following the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly, it was decided that MLAs would be provided with pre-paid envelopes, for use when posting correspondence which related solely to Assembly Business. There is no record at that time of consideration being given to postage other than 1st Class.

There is also no record of any consideration having been given to this issue since then nor has there been a demand from MLAs for a 2nd Class pre-paid postage service.

Review of the Assembly Secretariat

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission to confirm (i) the date it decided to appoint Mr George Reid to lead the Review of the Assembly Secretariat; (ii) if a public tender process was completed prior to the appointment; and (iii) if a public tender process was not carried out to detail the reasons why.

(AQW 4776/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): In response to the first part of your question, the Commission formally agreed to appoint Mr George Reid as Chair of a Steering Group for the Review of the Assembly Secretariat at its meeting on 5 July 2007.

With reference to part (ii), a single tender process was undertaken prior to the appointment, in line with the Assembly Commission's procurement policy.

The Speaker discussed with members of the Commission the requirement to appoint an independent person to chair a Steering Group for the Review of the Secretariat. All were of the view that the chair should have extensive and in-depth experience of governance within a parliamentary context, ideally in a devolved setting; and be of sufficient standing that they could engage easily with elected representatives at a senior level. The Speaker was also anxious that anyone appointed would have undoubted independence and no prior connection with the Northern Ireland Assembly that could be perceived to have a bearing on any conclusions or recommendations arising from a review.

With these criteria in mind the Speaker identified Mr George Reid as an ideally suited individual, and consulted with other members of the Commission. He also sought and received the views of the Comptroller and Auditor General who raised no objections to the approach being taken. Mr Reid had recently retired as the Presiding Officer to the Scottish Parliament and as such had led the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body through many relevant issues which included

understanding the skills and capabilities required from a management team in supported of a corporate body. His appointment also represented excellent value for money (although given that the estimated number of days required was not significant this was only a contributory factor).

It was therefore determined on the basis of Mr Reid's:

- Unquestionable experience;
- Understanding of the Corporate Management issues pertinent to a devolved legislature;
- Understanding of members;
- Availability;
- Exceptionally attractive costs; and
- The sensitivity of the requirement;

that a wider procurement exercise would not produce a better result and would lead to nugatory costs for the Assembly Commission in terms of the process and for likely service providers. A single tender approach was therefore adopted. This is in line with Assembly Commission's procurement policy and as stated above was supported by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Review of the Assembly Secretariat

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission to detail (i) the dates of meetings it held with Mr George Reid prior to his appointment to lead the Review of the Assembly Secretariat; (ii) the members of the Commission who attended these meetings; and (iii) the date on which Mr George Reid was first approached in relation to the proposed review. (AQW 4777/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): In response to part (i) of your question, the Speaker, as Chairperson of the Assembly Commission met with Mr George Reid once prior to his appointment. The meeting took place on Friday 29 June. Mr Reid undertook to consider the invitation and confirmed in a subsequent telephone call that he would be willing to accept the position if the Commission agreed. The Commission agreed to appoint Mr Reid as Chair of a Steering Group for the Review of the Assembly Secretariat at its meeting on 5 July 2007.

In reference to part (ii) aside from the Speaker no other member of the Assembly Commission attended the meeting. In advance of the meeting the Speaker consulted all members of the Commission about issuing an invitation to Mr Reid to consider serving as Chair of a Steering Group for a review of the Assembly Secretariat.

Finally, in response to part (iii) of your question, the first approach to Mr George Reid in relation to the proposed review was during the meeting on Friday 29 June.

Costs of the Review of the Assembly Secretariat

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission to detail (i) the expenditure to date in relation to the Review of the Assembly Secretariat; (ii) the amount paid to members of the Review for their services; (iii) the costs in relation to accommodation and travel for members of the Review panel; and (iv) all other costs associated with the commissioning and completion of the Review. (AQW 4779/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): Expenditure to date in relation to the Review of the Assembly Secretariat has been £39,136.17.

In relation to part (ii) - part (iv) of your question, please see table below:

Consultancy Support	£32,055.50
Accommodation and Travel	£5,930.03
Other costs	£1,150.64

This excludes staff time which has not been quantified or costed.

Review of the Assembly Secretariat

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission to detail, in relation to the recommended abolition of the Principal Clerk posts, (i) the evidence that was produced, in the Review of the Assembly Secretariat; (ii) the number of (a) MLAs; and (b) Assembly staff, that recommended this; and (iii) its assessment of the impact on experience, knowledge and capacity of staff. (AQW 4804/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The Review Team considered a number of factors when gathering evidence with regard to Principal Clerks' posts. This included consideration of the structures and banding in other Legislatures. Additionally, the level of expertise required at Clerking level and the need to ensure that staff in the Clerking grade developed further professional management experience was also a key consideration.

The Review Team did not consult specifically on this proposal. However, during interviews within the Clerking Directorate and with other staff, it became apparent that too many layers existed within the Clerk Assistant's Directorate which militated against its efficient and effective operation.

We expect that the resultant de-layering will provide better opportunities for existing staff to develop their clerking, professional and managerial

skills which will ultimately lead to improved service delivery for all MLAs.

Review of the Assembly Secretariat

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission to detail any correspondence it has received from the Assembly Chairpersons' Liaison Group, in relation to decisions agreed by the Assembly Commission arising from the Review of the Assembly Secretariat. (AQW 4806/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): A letter from the Chairperson's Liaison Group (CLG) dated 23 November was sent to the Director of Implementation, Mr Frank Duffy.

The letter was referred to the Director of Implementation, Mr Frank Duffy, who along with Mr Gerry O' Neill and Ms Nuala Dunwoody met with the Chair of the Chairpersons Liaison Group, Mr Sammy Wilson on 25 January 2008 to discuss the issues raised within the letter.

The Assembly Commission did not receive any correspondence from CLG. However details of the meeting between the Chairperson of the CLG and Mr Duffy were provided to the Assembly Commission in the monthly report of the Clerk/Director General dated 13 December 2007.

Cross-Community Definition

Mr O'Dowd asked the Assembly Commission (i) for its definition of 'cross-community' in relation to the booking procedures for events by Members of the Legislative Assembly; (ii) what regard was given to the legal definition of 'cross-community' as defined in the Assembly Standing Orders, and in legislation governing the Assembly, when drafting these procedures; and (iii) what regard was given to Article 28 of the Fair Employment and Treatment Order 1998 when drafting these procedures. (AQW 5068/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): In relation to the booking of events which require 'cross-community' support, the Commission has agreed that such events must be sponsored by at least three MLAs, to include support from one unionist and one nationalist.

With reference to your question regarding the consideration of the legal definition of 'cross-community', officials took all relevant considerations into account when preparing the paper, and discussed it with Legal Services. The term was intended to reflect the statutory definition.

The Fair Employment and Treatment Order 1998, deals with the provision of goods, facilities and services to the public, or to a section of the public, and requires that there be no discrimination in such provision. However, these provisions govern provision to the public, and so do not apply to the provision of facilities or accommodation to Members of the Assembly, or to political parties.

Good Relations Working Group

Mr O'Dowd asked the Assembly Commission to detail (i) the written remit of the "Good Relations Working Group (GRWG)"; (ii) what regard was paid to all and any equality legislation in drawing up that remit; (iii) the advice or guidance sought from the Equality Commission in relation to any aspect of the GRWG; (iv) who sits on the GRWG and what is its voting and reporting mechanisms; and (v) any experience or background in implementing or managing the introduction of equality legislation and regulations of any member or official of the GRWG, and if so, what is that experience and background, including qualifications. (AQW 5069/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): With reference to part (i) of your question, the Assembly Commission at their meeting on the 5 March 2008 agreed that "officials bring forward a paper on the establishment of a Good Relations Working Group; and that the remit of that Good Relations Working Group would include a review of the policy on events at Parliament Buildings". To date no further detail on the remit has been proposed to, or agreed by, the Commission.

With reference to part (ii), the full remit of the Good Relations Working Group is currently being considered. As a public authority, the Assembly Commission is committed to fulfilling its statutory duties to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity, and regard to the desirability of promoting good relations. This commitment will be reflected in any remit proposed for the Commission's approval.

In answer to part (iii), while advice has yet to be sought in relation to the establishment of a Good Relations Working Group any submission to the

Assembly Commission in this regard will take account of best practice and guidance available from bodies such as the Equality Commission and the Community Relations Council.

In response to part (iv), the membership, voting and reporting mechanisms have not yet been identified.

Finally, with regard to part (v), at this stage there have been no proposals made to, or decisions made by, the Assembly Commission regarding membership or staff support to a Good Relations Working Group.

Equality Legislation

Mr O'Dowd asked the Assembly Commission to detail (i) the number of its officials who have received training in relation to their duties concerning the implementation and adherence to equality legislation pertaining to the functions of the Assembly and its Commission; (ii) the percentage and total of Commission staff that number of 'trained staff' represents; (iii) the number of elected members of the Commission who have received training in relation to their duties to equality legislation pertaining to the functions of the Assembly and Commission. (AQW 5072/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): In relation to training, 234 officials have received training in relation to their duties concerning the implementation and adherence to equality legislation pertaining to the functions of the Assembly and its Commission. This figure represents 83% of the total staff complement.

The Speaker and senior officials received a briefing on Section 75 from Duncan Morrow of the Community Relations Council in 2007. All Commission Members received training on Section 75 awareness in relation to competency based recruitment in March 2008.

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